

“Are you tough enough?”

Mt. H'Kusam. The Kusam Klimb. A 'Mountain Endurance Event'. The Grussam Kusam. Call it what you like, but a name will never do this race justice. Here is my story of how I survived the Kusam Klimb:

How steep can it really be? The week before Kusam I grilled friends who had raced the course over the last two years, since it's inception in 2004. They all echoed the same descriptors: vertical, straight up, bloody steep. Looking back after finishing the Kusam Klimb, I realize the course was described to me in perfect detail-but I didn't quite get it until race day. "I can do steep, I love steep-no problem", I thought. Gaining 1400 metres of elevation over a mere 6 km is more than just steep. It's bloody steep.

Inside scoop please? I asked for last minute advice from my friends and training buddies before heading up to Sayward, British Columbia for the race. Everyone had their own strategies for surviving the Klimb. Some said trekking poles were the key for the long climb up. Others suggested a fast start would be the best way to get ahead and avoid jostling for position on the single track. One friend even recommended taking the time to stash a walking stick at the base of the steep hiking section. Everyone told me to bring good gloves. "Gloves? On a trail run?" I questioned the need for such a luxury item in a race. Little did I know...

4:30 am, race day. It has been raining hard all night and the smell of a new spring day greets me in my driveway. I chose to make the 1.5hour journey to Sayward on race morning, rather than last night, with the hopes of getting a solid night sleep in my own bed. More than a dozen of my trail training buddies set up camp "Rat" last night in Sayward and I am anxious to meet up with them at the race start. I wake up with the sun and join Jack Johnson for a duet or two along the winding road up north.

6:00am, race central. The sun is up and the smell of fear is in the air. Once I arrive at the community hall I am greeted by a pair of enthusiastic volunteers who hand over my racer package and wish me luck. Inside my goodie bag I find a highly detailed map and get my first glimpse at the actual race-course. Topo lines cram together in unimaginable proximity. I squint to count the lines...I think I may need glasses.

I scan the leg descriptions on the back of the map: "Checkpoint 1 is less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the 'up' section and it gets a lot steeper, narrower and rougher after this point. If you are at all unsure if you can make it- TURN AROUND and head back the way you came...", Oh Yeah.

Leg 1: 3.7km, 381m elevation gain. And we're off. Starting out on the road at a nice steady pace to shake out the bugs and get the feet moving. 2.2k on the road and then we start climbing up a nice wide trail. Within 15minutes everyone

is hiking and I will soon realize this is the end of running for at least 90minutes. My calves are burning and I am wondering how they are going to contain themselves at this rate. Wounded soldiers fall to the side of the trail to massage calves and control wheezing. My training buddy swiftly treks off into the unknown ahead. I pass a few gasping climbers and find myself on my own, falling into a steady rhythm. The gang at checkpoint 1 greets us with smiles, energy and water. I throw back a shot of h2o without missing a stride and move onto the next stage.

Leg 2: 4km, 1092 elevation gain. The trail turns to single track and becomes rocky and rugged. A heavy breather is on my heels and attempting to engage me in friendly conversation. Not feeling in the mood to make friends, I reply with single syllable grunts and hold my pace. This friendly Kusam survivor offers me some advice between gasps for breathe: "Take off your ring cause your fingers are going to swell up to the size of sausages before the end of the race." I picture a set of Bavarian sausage fingers groping at rocks and shake the image from my mind. "You got gloves? Now's about the time you wanna put them on" she gasps. "Don't worry, I won't pass you", she adds. I pull on my old mountain biking gloves while maneuvering up the rock. Nope, I think, you won't be passing me.

Suddenly the trail shoots upwards and I am pulling and pushing my weight up the mountain with my biceps and triceps. My calves sigh in relief. The other climbers fall away below me as I pull up in a fluid monkey scramble up the face of the rock. Hands, feet and belly grab ropes, trees and rough ledges for handholds. The minutes melt away into a flow of moves and scheduled fuel consumption. Finally, relief and a few steps of 'running' but my legs say no and beg for the familiar hiking stride. I fight to run 5 or 10 steps as the incline quiets for a rare moment. But the battle is lost instantly and the climb continues.

I reach the snowline and traverse through the deep footsteps of the frontrunners. A short downhill section allows for some fun slippery bounding in the slushy snow leading to a small lake. I learn later that in previous years scorched racers dove into the cool waters of this little gem to escape the heat. This year the junior hockey team would be more at home. Low snowline means a frozen lake this time. The picturesque spell is broken when a wall of snow suddenly appears before my eyes. Time to make the final 700m climb to the summit of the race.

"You're almost there! Keep going!" I can hear the enthusiastic cheers from the volunteers at checkpoint 2 perched atop an ice-covered saddle at 1500m. They have carved steps in the snow for us and I feel as if these stairs were made just for me. For one brief instant an unimaginable sensation of joy sweeps over me as I reach the summit. One hour and forty-five minutes up. No time to hang out I suck on my hose and tip forward over the other side. Picking up uncontrollable speed under woozy thighs the last words I hear are "Be careful, it's REALLY steep."

Leg 3: 2.6km down 732m-fast. By the time I gain the realization that I am finally running downhill I have already dropped a few hundred meters flying by the seat of my shorts-literally. This section is steep! I learn after the race that this descent nearly cost a cancellation of the race just a few days earlier. The steep grade, slippery ice and snow combined with glades, tree wells and surprise crevasse-like creeks almost proved to be too much for the race directors. A director's daughter took a nasty fall and slid out of control into a nice solid Douglas fir tree-breaking her arm. Glad I heard that story after the race. In the end the committee went on with the race, but only after securing over 1500m of ropes from tree to tree through this hazardous zone. After rappelling over 1500 meters of melting snow with a 1.5inch rope sliding through my hands, I must say that bringing 'good gloves' was the best advice I got from my friends. I even manage to avoid ripping open my shorts while crazy carpeting on my butt during this entire descent! Yipppeeee!

The grade gradually lessens and a new terrain unfolds around me as I continue down the flag marked trail. Snow banks turn to patches, ancient Douglas fir trees greet me, the forest floor opens up and a black muddy pit takes over for the trail. A few more meters and I arrive at checkpoint 3. Hurray I have made it to the clearcut! A smile is all I have time for here as my mind turns to a new focus. Catching my adventure racing teammate, Mountain Goat Trina, who I know has gained up to a kilometer on me. "I am coming to find you!!" a wild voice rattles around in my head.

Leg 4: 5km gravel road, 482 meters down. This is what I was made for! Fast, long strides pushing well beyond the boundaries of control I glide along the road soaking in the supernatural spectacle that has unfolded before me. A great valley leading to Sayward and the ocean beyond opens up in front of me and I see for the first time how far I have come and...how far I must go. This vast openness creates an unmistakable sensation of awe that great natural wonders always humble me with. I feel dizzy with happiness as I bound along this bear highway in the middle of freakin' nowhere.

Spotting a flash of blonde ahead I hold my pace and close the gap between this unknown and unsuspecting female racer. She is enjoying the scene as much as I am and she sends her arms wildly through the air to rejoice. At this moment she catches a glimpse of me over her shoulder and shudders with a look of disbelief. Her jets turn on and she scrambles to keep out of my reach. A few minutes later I have caught up with her and we exchange a couple of civil words on the fly. Thinking this is the last I will see of this wild child I truck onward down the mountainside.

1km from checkpoint 4 I spot my target in the valley below and refocus my mission to catch her. She is on the move and I know it may take a while. I am the hunter and she is my prey...dehydration is obviously setting in.

Leg 5: 3km gentle downhill trail, down 108m. This is a wonderful section of old, shady logging roads winding under canopies of young trees. Bear scat litters the trail and I realize I have not seen any racers in a very long while. I feel alone but content and focus on my steady stomp, stomp, stomp, breathe rhythm. A gel has gone bad in my guts and I struggle to take in enough fluid but force it down knowing there are still 5km remaining.

And then, like an angel, she appears! I save my energy calling her and utilize the element of surprise. But before long she hears my footsteps and greets me full of energy. "Thank god you are here! I was getting lonely and figured you would catch up to me sooner or later." I catch my breath, settle into her pace and share a few words about the race course so far. Feeling just the slightest bit bad for leaving her alone again, I pick my pace up and stride away. My new mantra begins- "Get as far away as possible, before the flats." I become the prey and the adrenaline of survival mode kicks in...dehydration or just psychotic?

Yet another creek crossing soaks me to the thighs and sends cool water into my shoes to ease my throbbing feet. This is the biggest one yet and I slow my pace to wade through the river. I get a shock on the other side, and a steep 50m bank greets me with roots for climbing. I slosh my way up using hands and feet and reach the edge with a giant sigh of relief-there is the final checkpoint! Only 2.5km to go! Splash, splash, splash comes from below and I turn expecting to see a bear in the river. To my disbelief there are 2 racers scrambling up the bank from below-the wild child and the mountain goat! My heart leaps into my mouth and I sprint through the checkpoint like a deer on the run. "EXCUSE ME!!"

Leg 6: 2.5k gravel road and pavement, down 151m. Homestretch, every step counts to stay ahead of these hunters. On route to the finish I pass 2 of my training buddies who throw double takes my way. "Looking good!" A thumbs up is all I have left at this point in the game. A fast 2k down the gravel road makes for the perfect finish on spent legs. But as the grade flattens out I feel the true weight of my body and the level of lead in my legs. The ground is flat but I swear I am running uphill. 500meters on the road and I can't believe my eyes when the finish appears. Through the gates and holy crap that was hard. Hugs and cheers all round. Three hours and twenty-four minutes of pain and pleasure later- I survived the Kusam Klimb!

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