THE MONTH IN REVIEW

Muddy Buddy 2004

Michael Wood relives his childhood in a gruelling race

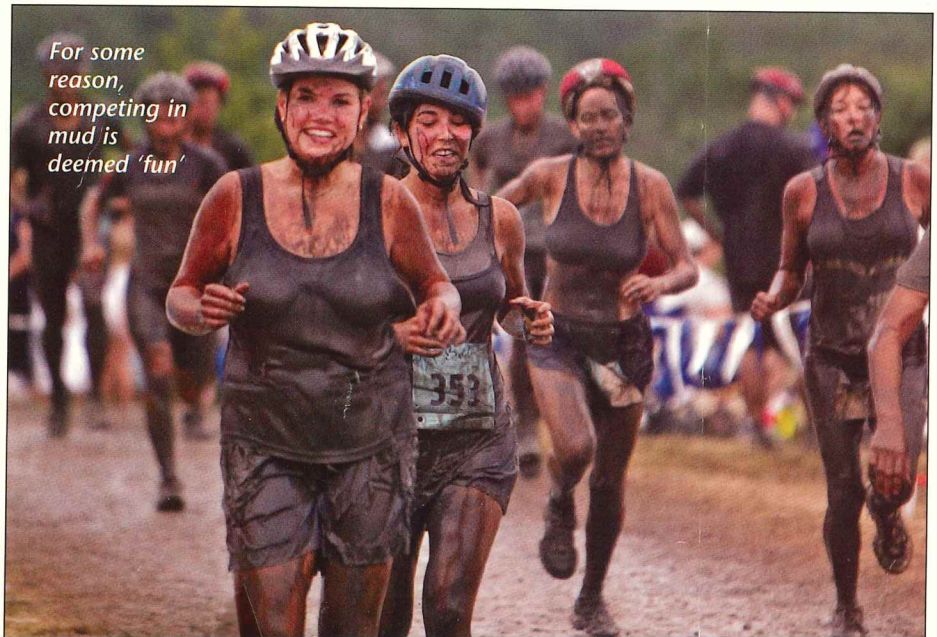
A RATHER depressing point dawned on me as I delved my head once again into the mud. The last time I rolled around in grime, my days were spent watching cartoons, living on a diet of fish finger sandwiches and chasing girls in the vain hope of a snog. Decades later, crawling through a bog during a race aptly named Muddy Buddy, I realised the only area showing any signs of maturity are my taste buds, although I can safely say I have lost my youthful habit of wallowing in mud which, according to my mother, used to be inevitable every time I left the house. So, when recently tempted with reliving those dirt-ridden days diving into a muddy bog after tackling a grueling 10K course in the harsh hill country of central Texas, USA, I did not think twice.

Maybe I was a little hasty!

THE idea of Muddy Buddy is for two partners to start the race together, one cycling and one running. At a checkpoint, the cyclist drops the bike, completes an obstacle and then sets off on foot. Following behind, the runner then arrives at the same point and picks up the bike. The pair interchange between cycling and running along the course until just short of the finish when they meet up again for the real fun. Waiting for the exhausted 'buddies' is a pit prepared, with immense glee I am sure, by organisers who demand all contestants commando crawl through knee-deep mud to complete the race. These sadistic overseers even order poor, disorientated runners to go back for a double dose of grime if not sufficiently dirty – or in my case, half blinded.

With foresight, the decision to sign up should have taken a little longer than the complacent few seconds my testosterone allowed.

The idea to enter was introduced to me by an excited American friend who phoned to say my visit to Austin, Texas, home of the impregnable Tour De France hero Lance Armstrong, coincided with a race she needed a partner for. Imagining how much fun it would be watching women covered head to toe in mud, I quickly put my name down. What I didn't realise was that I was her fifth choice. Numbers one to four realised what they were in for!



For some reason, competing in mud is deemed 'fun'



Dallas, Texas conjures up different mental images for television fans

It was only when I balanced myself precariously on the handlebars of my bike, bleary-eyed staring through the dark Sunday morning haze with just four hours of sleep and a beer induced headache to consider, the sinking feeling took hold. However, my trepidation was soon replaced with confusion as speakers began blaring out the American national anthem accompanied by 1,600, sorry 1,599, athletes humming proudly along with hands on hearts. My body yearned for a comfy sofa, cup of tea and Richard and Judy! But as a cannon blasted signaling the first group to set off, I knew there was no backing out, caffeine or no caffeine.

Shuffling toward the start, I began scanning the opposition hoping to spot similarly hungover folk to comfort my aching head. What I saw was wholly unexpected. Superman and Batman stood just five feet away busily chatting to a guy in a three-piece suit and girl in full evening gown. But before I could make sense of the scene, the canon echoed through the hills once again prompting superheroes, businessmen and athletes alike to take off at speed followed by me aboard my trusty steed pedaling frantically after them.

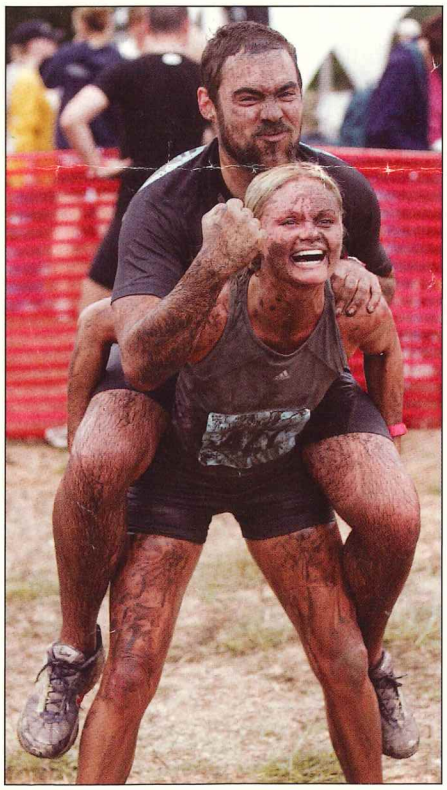
Chaos underway

THE usual chaotic start ensued with the heavy mix of nerves and vigor spurring



How to get there

BRITISH AIRWAYS offers a return flight to Austin, Texas, in February for £463 with a stop-over in either Dallas or Houston. Delta Airlines also offers the same package but at the reduced price of £338



cyclists to slam on brakes as they tried to find a clear path to gain momentum.

When the crowd of both men and women thinned out, I was able to take in the surroundings while navigating treacherous muddy downhills and hazardous streams standing in the way. Delicate yucca trees, wizened bushes and warped cacti dotted the landscape. Hawks flew menacingly overhead eying up wild turkeys roaming around freely. Masses of limestone gravel lay scattered on the ground causing my heart to skip round a corner. Wheels stuck in thick quagmires at each hill climb forcing me to dejectedly dismount and struggle on foot with the bike.

But all was not lost. There on the horizon was a heavenly glow surrounding the first checkpoint sign beckoning me. Crossing the line, I dropped the bike before flailing wildly on a row of monkey bars. I relished the next phase which I could tackle the way God intended. Unfortunately, what I didn't realise was that my partner and hundreds of other runners behind me would soon be picking up bikes and speeding past on the two foot wide path I was jogging along.

The manic game of human frogger, which followed, amazingly, failed to result in a pile-up of runners and bikes and at the next checkpoint, following a precarious cargo net, I hauled myself onto the two wheels my buddy had left for me. The next few miles were completed in a haze of sweat and mud until I clapped eyes the beloved finish line. But before us lay the pit lined with spectators drooling at each new contestant who hesitantly approached.

As my partner and I neared, a race organiser clutching a loud hailer warned of the consequences if we didn't exit the other side looking like the creature from the black lagoon. I glanced over to Val, she looked back and with an almighty 'sod it', we launched ourselves into the slop.

In swimming pools, I am always wary to keep my eyes firmly closed so not to wash my contact lenses away. So with this in mind, I am baffled as to why when ducking my head under a rope my eyes opened. What did I expect to see? Certainly not the fine female curves I used to feast my goggled eyes on during school swimming lessons in those juvenile years, and admittedly not so juvenile years.

Only an act from above helped me cross the remaining grime in my dilapidated state – that and the promise of two free pints of beer waiting for us at the end. We wearily dragged ourselves out of the bog and wobbled our way down the final stretch and across the finish line spurred on by cheers from giggling onlookers and the itching desire to wash mud from places no mud has gone before.

As I lay on the floor grinning contently through black teeth, I rubbed at my sore eyes and made a promise to myself. If for some strange reason I find myself back here in years to come, I will definitely look before I leap, not after.

Other events in Texas

IF MUD is not your thing, then Texas has dozens of other races to keep even the most avid of athletes happy.

October sees the Ride for the Roses started by the Lance Armstrong Foundation to raise money for their Cancer trust. The race, which is over 6-100 miles depending on fitness, raised nearly £3m in 2003.

Also, the Motorola marathon in February is said to be the fastest course in the world with the number of entries reaching 12,000 from 28 different countries.

Or for the more adventurous among us, the 5K Skinnydipper Sun Run at Wildwood Naturist's Resort in March