

# True Grit

By Austin Murphy

**M**OST OF the people you find in adventure racing have chosen the sport because it injects a bit of drama, a frisson of danger, into their lives. In the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, I met an adventure racer for whom the sport is an oasis of calm in his otherwise dangerous existence. Chris Ballou is a five-year veteran of the New York City Police Department's Scuba Team, an elite group of rescue-and-recovery specialists whose work is by no means limited to underwater missions. For three weeks after the attacks the 30-year-old Ballou worked 12- to 16-hour shifts, seven days a week, in various search operations at the disaster site.

There are some questions Ballou won't answer. "I don't want to talk about grisly stuff," he says. "I don't think it's professional." He will say this: "I worked on the recovery of Flight 800 [the TWA jet that went down off the coast of Long Island in 1996], and this is worse than that. I know 15 guys in that debris pile."

Before the catastrophe, you may have seen, in August, the photo of Ballou leaning over the railing of the Statue of Liberty's torch and helping to pull to safety the nitwit parachutist who'd become entangled in it. Or maybe you know Ballou as the president of the New York Adventure Racing Association. In the immediate aftermath of Sept. 11 the idea of adventure racing—of any activity devoted to simulated ordeals and contrived misery—seemed absurd. It's beginning to seem less absurd now. "People want to start training again," says Ballou. "They want to race, to begin getting back to normal."

Normal, of course, has always been a relative term in adventure circles, and that's especially so now. Long before the World Trade Center disaster Ballou had planned a 24-hour urban adventure race called the NYC Extreme, for May 10, 2002. Is the race still a go? "Now more than ever," he says. "Calling it off would be like giving in. The heck with that."

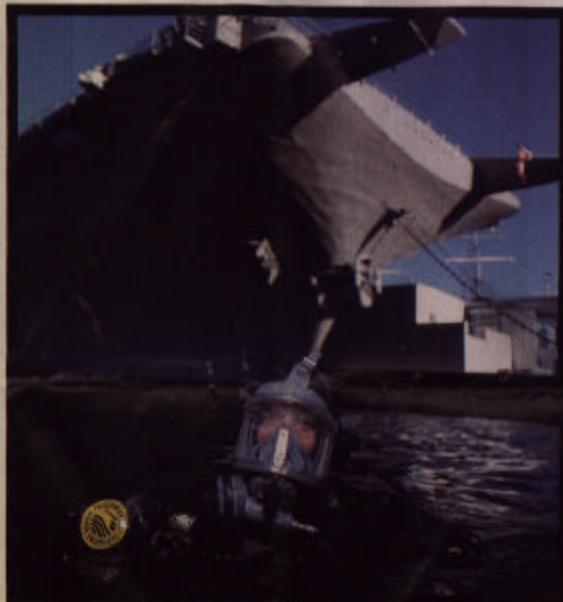
Ballou will need to alter the course, however. He'd planned to put a checkpoint on the observation deck of each of the doomed skyscrapers, which were to provide 1,000 meters of stair-climbing. The redesign can wait. Ballou's job still has him clawing through rubble in search of victims. He has donned scuba gear and jumped

into the East and Hudson rivers, searching "every possible underwater target" for explosives. The last time I spoke with him, he was on his way to ground zero where, aided by sonar, he and his team continued to search for the airplanes' black boxes.

You wonder if, when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, the young Ballou ever answered, "A real-life action figure." That, essentially, is what he is. You'd think someone whose job description includes sifting through wreckage for body parts and pulling stiffs out of rivers and nincompoops off the Statue of Liberty might want to find a plush sofa and a good bottle of Scotch on his downtime. Not Ballou. Even by the gung ho standards of the Scuba Team, Ballou is, in the words of fellow member and adventure racer Keith Duval, "somewhat fanatical."

Before all hell broke loose, Ballou and a group of like-minded aerobic animals known as the Thursday Night Vampires would meet on Staten Island or Manhattan and run, bike and in-line skate from 9 p.m. to dawn. While training for two ultramarathons, Ballou pushed his twin sons in a Baby Jogger. "I wore out the tires on it," he says. "I had to order new ones."

Ballou first met Duval five years ago at the wreckage site of Flight 800. Duval had been set to compete in the Eco-Challenge in British Columbia a few weeks later,



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but the crash scotched his plans. At the site Duval enlisted Ballou to compete with him at the '97 Eco in Australia. Night-trekking across the outback with two other teammates, and under the name Team New York's Finest, they finished 29th.

Anyone considering racing in the NYC Extreme be forewarned: Ballou is neither a kind nor gentle course designer. He seeks to give Extreme competitors "a taste of expedition racing in a 24-hour race. At the end of the bike leg I want them to hate their bikes." How will he replace the stair-climbing that his race lost with the Twin Towers? His reply captures the attitude of a city bloodied but unbowed. "It's still New York," says Ballou. "It's not like there's a shortage of tall buildings." □