

Emily Ford Leads All the Way on the Ice Age Trail

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TODD POQUETTE AND THE 906 ADVENTURE TEAM MISSION



Andrea Larson

Editor's Note: Director of the 906 Adventure Team, Todd Poquette, left the security of corporate America to do something that inspired, motivated people, and reached people who weren't currently served by someone. And he continues because the need still exists. The 906 Adventure Team has both after-school and Adventure Bike Club programs in Marquette, Ishpeming, Delta & Gogebic Counties. Details & registration can be found at 906adventureteam.com/ride.

Respect. Effort. Consistency. Grit. The 906 Adventure Team (906AT) established these core values on day one, and people have been noticing. After seven years, the youth biking program's inclusion has exploded to over 500 kids across the UP.

Quite a feat when considering the UP's sparse population, plus adding in another 200 kids in similar programs beyond its borders. Then throw in the epic races that sell out in minutes, which have given back \$141,000 to local trails. However, it's not just about the numbers — it's about the changed lives.

Ingredient No. 1: People

Todd Poquette gladly shares his recipe that creates the mystique around 906AT. And the first ingredient is people. From coaches to participants, everyone buys into the mission statement:

Empowering people to become the best version of themselves through outdoor adventure.

Ingredient No. 2: Experiences

"We do a good job as humans to insulate ourselves from danger," Poquette said, "so we need to provide people experiences to push [themselves] outside of their comfort zone, to become stronger. Our events provide struggle to help people evolve, something missing in the comfortable modern world."



Todd Poquette with Wyatt Clement, the first high school youth to finish the 2019 Marji Gesick.

BUT FOR THE SELFIES, ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF 906 AT.

906AT has no shortage of experiences, or mysteries as participant Ian Kangas described them. One parent put it this way: "906AT meets kids where they are and provides the encouragement they need to move forward."

Beyond the youth program, adults attempt one of the races offered by 906AT: The Polar Roll, the Crusher, or Marji Gesick. In 2015, the adult field at these events mirrored traditional races. Due to the 906AT mission, this demographic has shifted to 25 percent women and a surprisingly high number of kids and families. Each race offers bike and foot options with varying distances. Although you'll see seasoned athletes sprawled out on their backs at these events (the Marji Gesick boasts a 55 percent DNF

rate), the youth program offers kid-appropriate experiences. These experiences make them uncomfortable enough within a group to elevate each child to ride hills and features they couldn't fathom tackling earlier in season.

"Being part of 906AT has opened my kids up to so many opportunities they may not have had otherwise," Stacey Kangas said. "It's a second family who pushes us and encourages to do the best we can. I am forever grateful to 906AT." Stacey's son, Ian, finished the Marji Gesick 50 and the Crusher 100 events alongside her husband, Jon, this past year. "Ian went from being a self-conscious, pudgy tweener," Jon said, "to a relatively lean, adult-sized teenager in one of the toughest years for any

teenager, much less adult.”

A surprisingly high number of youths have conquered the toughest events, including the Marji Gesick. “We use an em-

powering mechanism to build confidence and resilience,” Poquette said, “rather than pitting kids against one another, and so they naturally elevate each other.”



Poquette: “We hid this gorilla in the woods to scare racers at the 2019 Crusher. He made a cameo appearance at the Adventure Bike Club.”



Parents and their children adventure together at the the 2019 Marji Gesick.

Ingredient No. 3: Respect

To pull off these programs, over 150 coaches need to buy in to the philosophy, with everyone following the same set of rules. “906AT is behavior-focused, from top to bottom, because kids look at coaches as role models,” Poquette said. “Kids develop relationships with adults they respect. And if a kid respects you, you have every opportunity to change their lives.”

In the end, 906AT gives the credit to the kids doing the hard work and learning how to engage with peers. “Respect is extended across both genders equally,” Poquette added, “with coaches modeling day in and day out. Often overlooked is the fact these kids are inspiring adults, the role models.” He also pointed out that many coaches are inspired by middle schoolers riding obstacles. With women comprising half of the coaches, respect knows no gender limitation.

Growth Mindset

After taking these ingredients, simmering them thoroughly with a growth mindset, the end product of 906AT is: Transformation. 906AT desires to equip people to adapt. There’s no better example than what 2020 threw at us to demonstrate the need for a growth mindset. “We need types of life experiences available to us to fold into our safe bubble we live in,” Poquette said, “because we need to prepare for when life is hard, and we are forced into it.”

In 2020, 906AT led by example, creating the Enhanced Crusher after permit rules would not allow an in-person event. This adapted event drew 1,000 people to the UP wilderness over a three-month window, where they faced internal and external demons on the race course. The format attracted many people that had never raced before. Even more inspiring were the riders who returned — *up to seven times* — until they finished. (For an in-depth coverage of one determined finisher, see *Crush Proof, Shane Stuard v. Todd Poquette*, by Chris Schotz, in the February 2021 issue of *Silent Sports Magazine*.) After this event far-exceeded expectations, and the permit rules continued to limit in-person events into 2021, the Polar Roll also adapted with the Enhanced format.

We often hear or think: *Life’s not fair. There’s no finish line. The world isn’t safe.* Some may consider these realities

of life a bit depressing. But equipping both children and adults to overcome challenges creates a positive mindset through 906AT. “Kids need to learn not to depend on rules to create success for them,” Poquette said. “The kid whose parent blames his loss on the referee is not doing the child any favors. Like mountain biking, life is inherently dangerous. Kids who are taught to embrace that reality will be ahead of those who do not. There is no finish line, and it’s not about how good you are today, or what you can and cannot do today; it’s all about getting a little better every day on the way to wherever you’re going.” With life being the ultimate endurance event, these life lessons resonate beyond the trails.

Transformation

Simply put, 906AT saved Mike Myers’ life. Mike went from drinking 14 beers a day, smoking over two packs of cigarettes a day, and never riding a bike, to conquering the Crusher 40 with his nine-year-old son, Bryce. And he hasn’t even had the opportunity to race the Marji Gesick — yet. Still, the Marji Gesick’s mantra, *Find your limits. Destroy them*, not only gave Mike hope, but also gave hope to his sons. Each lives out this mindset every day.

Mike was waitlisted in 2019, and the 2020 event was cancelled, which is one more test of the growth mindset. Nonetheless, it’s the transformation off the bike that resonates the most. Mike said, “I learned to get sober through a twelve-step program, but 906AT taught me how to live.”

An organization using money from races that boast high DNF rates to fund youth programs seems like an odd juxtaposition. However, the core goals of both dovetail into the organization’s desire to equip people for the real world. “We want to empower people to evolve to open internal personal doors,” Poquette said. “The expectation is that everyone brings their best every day and be a part of something bigger than themselves.”

After learning about 906AT, I found the desire to be a part of this mystique pulled me to the start line of a running race after my eight-year run-event hiatus. And it can change your life, too. But you’ll have to earn it. Are *you* ready to be empowered?



Christie Close, 906AT, takes a selfie of women and men leading groups together, encouraging girls and boys to do the same.





Mike Myers takes a selfie at “the sign” with his son during the Crusher, 2020.



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