

Don Bodger

News Leader Pictorial

No one gets voted off the West Coast Trail in this version of Survivor. The survival of each group totally depends upon the willingness of everyone from different backgrounds to work together as a team.

Duncan Christian School students received valuable life lessons at overcoming hardships and conquering their own fears during a recent WCT excursion. Whether starting at the Port Renfrew end or Pachena Bay, the three groups faced a series of tests from the weather, the environment and their own physical limitations to reach the end of the 75-kilometre trail successfully.

Most of the students had to shed some blood, sweat and tears to make it.

“When you’re in an environment like this and doing challenging things together, it brings some true character out in some students,” said DCS Principal Kevin Visscher, the leader of the North 1 group.

An injury to student Leanne Vanderschaaf quickly made other students in that group realize they needed to spring into action to help.

“It was tough at the beginning,” said Visscher. “We had to figure some things out. Over time, we figured out ‘this is how we’re going to do it.’ It’s very easy to get divided. We’re out here together. We only have each other.”

Visscher was pleased how the students encouraged each other.

“If they’re not, then we’re missing something,” he said. “Our focus in our group has been it’s not about you, it’s about others.”

Tom Veenstra’s south group had a brutal first day on the trail. It took three hours to complete the first three kilometres and only became worse during a steady rain in the afternoon and evening.

A long day of hiking that started at 8 a.m. and was still going until after 6 p.m. to reach the first campsite at Camper Bay forced Veenstra to separate the group. He decided to forge ahead with yours truly and students Jordan Lee and Kurtis Briggs in tow to start a fire and set up tarps for shelter and cooking before the others arrived.

“Every trip is different,” said Veenstra. “The first day is probably the most challenging day I’ve ever had dealing with the rain and having a long, long day.

“There was a lot of stresses that first day. You’ve got the heavy packs the first day starting in the south.”

It didn’t get any easier the second day for the south group, dealing with evacuation arrangements for chaperones Darren Colyn and Linda Lee. Some of the students were feeling the pain of the previous day and doubting whether they could continue.

Despite better weather conditions, a late start around 11 a.m. meant another hard day to cover just nine kilometres of steep terrain with numerous ladder sections before dark to reach the Walbran Creek campsite.

The trip improved considerably for the group on the third day, with bright sunshine lifting spirits during the approximately 11.5-kilometre trek along the beach to Cribs Creek.

The students were clearly feeling better at that point about their ability to complete the trip and eventually did so in fine style without further incident.

“It’s cool that we’re here on the beach and having fun,” said Cole Humphries. “It’s been pretty hard, though, because I have a screwed-up knee.”

Humphries and friend Micah Wiebe wanted to abandon the trip at Camper Bay, but decided to stay after consulting with Humphries' mother via cell phone.

Humphries said he's glad he stuck it out. "If I would have left, I would have missed out on all these things. I would have thought the trip was a bust."

"It's good that we've gotten this far and we've only lost two people," added Wiebe. "If you look at my feet, they're bruised to crap.

"I kind of expected it to be really, really hard in the south. I didn't expect it to be so hard on the sand."

Veenstra made Humphries and Wiebe co-leaders for the rest of the trip and they responded to the challenge by finding inner strength.

"It gets me going and that overall I can do it," said Wiebe, who liked the teamwork of the group.

"I was always friends with Ryan (Pearce) and Cole. Because of this, I've become friends with everyone."

"I like how we all work as a group and how we all succeed at everything," added Pearce.

Danielle Koekkoek was pumped about the trip before it started and then went through some mixed emotions after a hard first day. The third day really perked her up with burgers on the beach at Chez Monique's and other treats.

"I still really like it," she said. "It was awesome with all the sun and the whales and the lighthouse and the burgers. The day it rained I hated it. I just wanted to go home.

"I'm still really thoroughly enjoying it — just being with all your buddies in the middle of nowhere, especially Mr. V.

"I love our group. I couldn't have asked for a better group than this. I love when you come up the ladder and everyone's clapping."

Koekkoek received a shot of self-confidence from her ability to handle the physical demands of the WCT.

"Beforehand, I didn't think I could do this, I'm out of shape. Maybe I'm not as out of shape as I thought I was. I always think when I'm on the hiking trail I'm so lucky I'm able to do this."

Koekkoek and cousin Lindsay Bakker, another member of the south group, frequently had their thoughts and prayers on grandma Trienie Bosch, who has cancer.

"Right now, I've learned there's a big dependency on God," said Bakker. "I am doing this for my grandma. Right this week is quite an intense week because it's hard to be away. That's kind of been keeping me going. She faces pain like this. If she can do it, everyone can."

Bakker added the trip has been an awesome experience.

"It's also made us realize our strengths and weaknesses. At the beginning, everyone's so freaked out, 'I can't do the West Coast Trail.' I realize I can do it. It's not impossible.

Everyone makes it sound like it's like walking around the world."

Climbing so many ladders gave Bakker the most satisfaction.

"I'm freaked out of heights and no one would guess I'm a carpenter's daughter," she said. "Now conquering this makes me feel so much better about myself. Before this, I felt like jumping logs was a big deal."

Krista Wikkerink knew the trip would be demanding from mom Janet's experiences as a chaperone with older sister Tamara two years ago.

"Before she went two years ago, she thought all the ladders were like rope ladders,"

Krista said of her mom's perceptions. "Even walking on the beach with the wet rocks and things, you have to be careful."

Krista was thrilled her mom also came on this trip and the strength of the group helped her through the rough spots.

"Everyone was kind of there taking care of me. All I have is a bruise.

"I like the whole experience. I'd like to do this again, but I don't know if I want my toes to turn out like Mr. Veenstra's."

Briggs and Lee were like the group's superheroes, rummaging for firewood and making sure all camp needs were met.

"It's something that needs to be done," said Briggs. "People that are able to do it should. It makes everything better for everyone else.

"It's a good group. We stick together good and usually make the same decisions about things."

"I guess my dad's always told me to work hard," said Lee. "It just sort of comes naturally. You don't want to be the person everyone thinks is lazy. It just benefits everybody that way."

Lee's quick wit also helped keep group members smiling. "It helps liven a situation," he said.

The positive feedback of the students to the experience once the pain subsides doesn't surprise DCS educators and officials.

"You can pretty much to a T expect one of their favourite memories is the West Coast Trail," said DCS board chair and North 2 group member Teunis Verhoog.

"I knew some of the students from church, but I've never seen them that way — how they react under pressure."

Many of the chaperones made their own supreme sacrifices. South group nurse Meredith McAdam just had major surgery days before the trip, but refused to back out.

For The Record: In Part One last week, it should have stated Wendy Percy left the North 2 group at Thrasher Cove in order to accompany Kathryn Coopsie, who had a badly infected toe and would otherwise have been awaiting assistance on her own.

On the Web: Read Diary of a Mad Backpacker, Don Bodger's account of the south group's highs and lows, trials and tribulations at [www.cowichanewsleader.com](http://www.cowichanewsleader.com).

