Tough Mudder – where adults pay to play in the mud

By Jessie Marchesseau

TRUCKEE – I was more excited than nervous driving up to Northstar on Friday morning to preview this year's Tough Mudder course and try my hand at some of the obstacles.

Tough Mudder calls their events, not a race, but a challenge, and uses the tagline: Probably the Toughest Event on the Planet.



Nolan Kombol, head of course design for Tough Mudder, scales the Funky Monkey without dropping into the water. Photos/Jessie Marchesseau

I had taken their online Are You Tough Enough Quiz the night before and only scored a 75. "Maybe Mudder" it said. Had I chosen the wrong mustache on Question 4? Whatever the reason, I was apparently only questionably prepared.

The 11.3 mile course includes a nearly 2,000 foot elevation gain, 22 manmade obstacles, frigid water, barbed wire and mud, lots of mud.

Participants start their Tough Mudder adventure with the Kiss of Mud: crawling through a mud pit on their bellies underneath barbed wire strung just 8 inches off the ground. They then work their way through a series of other obstacles with names like Arctic Enema, Funky Monkey, Spider's Web, Electric Eel, Everest and finally, the Electroshock Therapy.

These obstacles take them through icy water, across greasy, muddy monkey bars, over rope nets, into electrified waters, up, down, in and out. And did I mention there's mud?

For participants starting to feel weary during the event, motivational signs are placed throughout the course with encouraging messages such as "Don't panic, but if you do, keep running" and "Remember you signed a death waiver."

If all of this sounds like your cup of tea, then you are not alone. Today's event sold-out with 15,000 people signed up to participate, and though Sunday still has some openings, organizers are expecting to be close to the 5,000-person limit.

With numbers like that, Nadia Guerriero, general manager of the Village at Northstar, said it would be the biggest single-day event the mountain has ever seen.

With Northern California events held at Squaw Valley last year, and Bear Valley in 2010, Tough Mudder appears to be growing by leaps and bounds. The company started with three events in 2010 and approximately 20,000 participants. This year, they have 35 events scheduled around the globe with nearly half a million people signed up.

This is the first time the event has been at Northstar. Nearly a year of preparation has gone into this weekend, with three weeks of on-mountain construction. This was apparent when stepping off the gondola to find numerous banners, tents, a stage, semi-truck trailers with built-in beer taps, a corral of sani-huts and a 15-foot high quarter pipe named Everest.

Though Everest is actually near the end of the course, it was our first challenge of the day. The object: run up it. I was wearing my hiking shoes, so I was totally prepared for this one. As it turns out, running up a quarter pipe is about as impossible as you would expect it to be. However, sliding back down on your rear is a pretty fun way to fail. I did it several times, not minding the dirt smearing up my back.

We had the advantage of attempting to climb Everest on a dry surface with dry shoes, enabling me and my media cohorts to get within inches of reaching the top. However, by the time participants hit this one, they will likely be wet and muddy, to say the least. The key for this one: teamwork, which is something Tough Mudder encourages. Once they reach the top, people help lift others that last little bit. Some will make human pyramids, climbing over each other to the top.

After giving up on summiting Everest for the day, we piled into Rangers which are essentially four-wheelers that seat five people, and headed uphill for a visit to the Funky Monkey. As we rounded the corner, a 2-foot-by-6-foot structure resembling the framing stage of a garage appeared. The orange sign above indicated it was, indeed, the Funky Monkey.

This obstacle gets its name from the monkey bars that span between what would be the roof rafters. I remember being an expert at the monkey bars in elementary school, but am pretty sure I have not laid a hand on one in a couple decades. Like everything in the Tough Mudder, these monkey bars have a twist, quite literally: some of the bars spin. Top it off with a 5-foot-deep pool of chilly water below and now you've got a challenge.

Nolan Kombol, head of course design for Tough Mudder, hopped right up and showed us how it's done. Then he did it again for a photo op. Still no takers from the group. I stepped to the edge and peered down. The water was green and murky, definitely not Lake Tahoe.

“How deep is it?” I asked.

Five feet. Almost as tall as me. Do I really want to get that wet? Maybe if it were 3 feet.

I reminded myself, “I’m here to have fun,” and grabbed hold of the metal bar overhead. I swung my other arm to the next bar and I was committed. The first half of the bars are on an incline as they travel up the roof line. I swung from one to the next, some of them turning slightly as I grabbed on. The group was shouting words of encouragement from the sideline and I kicked my legs as instructed.

Up the roof, then back down. My hands were getting a little tired, but I really did not feel like swimming. As I reached the other side, it took an extra swing to get my feet once again over solid ground, and I was done. Happy to be dry, my heart was beating a little fast, and I felt a definite sense of accomplishment. This could be addicting.

Next up for the challenge was Lindsay “with an A” Romack, the morning show host on 101.5 Truckee Tahoe Radio. She put forth a valiant effort, but did not come out nearly as dry as I did. The gasp she let out as she hit the water indicated that it was surely not a heated pool.

There were no other takers for the Funky Monkey, leaving Romack and me feeling just a touch braver than the boys as we headed back to the gondola.

So what is it about these strange, messy events that is so appealing to thousands of people?

“I think it’s really a way for people to challenge themselves without worrying about winning,” said Kombol. “It’s a way to get out and kind of act like a kid again.”

And plenty of people are willing to pay for the chance to act like a kid again, forking out registration fees of $90-$200

per person, a portion of which Tough Mudder donates to the Wounded Warrior Project.

It may sound like a lot, but after having the chance to play a little on the course, I have a feeling I may find myself joining the masses next year. After all, the quiz did say “maybe Mudder”… next time I will choose a cooler mustache.

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Note: More information about the Sept. 22-23 event at Northstar is online.

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