

## 'Race to Survive'

BY JENNIFER D.

"Our parents were worried about us," Baird said.

Eventually, those friends and family members decided it was Baird and Pena's decision to make, "and everyone ended up becoming incredibly supportive."

In part because the two put a lot of effort into preparing for the show. They had the skills to face the challenges, but did they have the skills to face each other?

"We put a lot of time and energy and effort into thinking whether we should do this or not," Baird said. "We went to counseling together, like, post-divorce, pre-show to figure out if there's something we could make work. And at the end of the day, we both decided that it would be a net positive for us."

"Race to Survive: New Zealand" premieres on USA on Monday with a 75-minute episode — 9 p.m. on Dish and DirecTV, and midnight on Comcast.

### Facing their fears

The race is grueling, but that fit right in their wheelhouse. "Nothing we did physically was scary for us," Pena said. And Baird added, "Climbing, canyoneering, paddling — that's what we do on a normal weekend."

"Every activity we did while we were together," she said, "was what we call type-2 fun. Which is the fun where it's only fun after the fact, not so much during."

"We're both very good at suffering," he added.

Good thing, because they were dealing with not just the stress of partnering with the ex-spouse, but the high stress of the competition. "This was the craziest thing either one of us have ever done by a mile," Baird said. "And we've done a lot."

"I would say it's the most emotionally taxing, physically taxing (thing we've done)," Pena agreed. "We put ourselves through the wringer on it."

They weren't afraid of the physical challenges, but the lack of food and water were more challenging still.

"We probably would have done all of those things very easily if we had food," Pena said. "But the lack of food and then also having to rely on your partner — who is your ex-husband or ex-wife — added a whole 'nother element to it that just made it hard... It was the hardest thing I've ever done."

"One of my biggest fears is going hungry," Pena said. And contestants were hungry the entire time. And so learning to deal with hunger, mentally and emotionally



Paula Pena, left, and Creighton Baird found out they'd been cast in "Race to Survive: New Zealand" four days after their divorce was finalized.

and physically, was challenging."

As was the cold. She said she "could feel myself getting hypothermic... multiple times... and not having the food or the body heat or even the ability to stop and warm up was terrifying for me at times."

"We lose our insulating fat layer on our bodies within the first week," Baird said, "and you spend the rest of the time cold. So if you're wet and cold, and it's 2 in the morning and you can't get a fire going? It's kind of dangerous. Kind of scary."

### Utah strong

Baird and Pena are one of three Utah teams in "Race to Survive: New Zealand." Which is kind of astonishing — a third of the contestants live in the Beehive State.

"I feel like the show pulled so hard from Utah because this is where the people are who can do a race like this," Baird said. "You need mountain athletes where this is what they do day-in, day-out if you want to even just finish the race."

The other Utah teams in the race are: Bronsen Iverson, 20, from Hurricane, and his father-in-law, Ryan Stewart, 43, from Lehi.

"Endurance athletes," mothers and friends Rhandi Orme, 40, from Kaysville and Ashley Paulson, 42, from St. George.

According to Baird, several of the other contestants also have more tangential ties to Utah.

### Breaking up is hard to do

Baird moved to Utah from Texas; Pena from South Carolina — in part because of outdoor opportunities here. They were together for seven years before divorcing.

"I wouldn't say that our relationship wasn't good enough for us to stay married," she said. They each wanted "different things out of life" and for the other "to be happy." And whatever differences they have "kind of like fell to the wayside" as they focused on the race. "We are adventurers at heart, and being outside in the wilderness and doing these big, wild

adventures was what fueled both of us for so long."

Still, it was kind of weird that, so quickly after their divorce, they found themselves in the wilds of New Zealand, living "under a tarp, starving with your ex-wife. Doing it together," Baird said. "It's a wild human experience that not many people will ever go through."

Perhaps surprisingly, they believe the experience "made our relationship stronger," Baird said. "Like, we're not back together. We're not getting remarried. But there's much more respect there. And... appreciation of what we have."

"Yeah," Pena agreed. "Absolutely." And, despite the hardships, running this race was "the most fun thing I think both of us have ever done," he said. She agreed: "I don't think that we would have done it if we didn't think that it sounded fun."

"If we felt that we were going to be truly miserable for 40 days," he added, "We wouldn't have done it. And if we thought that it wouldn't help heal our relationship, then we wouldn't have done it."

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