

HardTales in the Wild

Haleakala, House of the Sun - November 2003

Arriving on Maui the Tuesday evening of the week leading up to the 2003 Xterra World Championships, 28 degrees and 80% humidity slapped me in the face. As my clothes stuck fast, clammy and hot to burning skin, I wondered if I could acclimate in time.

Having just spent seven amazing weeks at altitude, swimming in 14 degree water and riding/running at around 8,500ft and beyond, with occasional snow fall, heat had become somewhat of a foreign concept to me.. Physically the distance of Xterra racing would be no trouble, but this heat, and more importantly the humidity, shocked me more than a little. Steffi, Ali and Anna were already in town and were very quick to point out how much it had cooled down since midday! Cooled Down?!!

Swimming in warm water the next morning was a pleasant change, but riding to registration mid morning revealed how vicious the sun could be.

The next few days brought no relief and the girls and I found little comfort. Lethargic comes close to describing the way we felt, and riding and running after 8am were out of the question. Motivation was at a premium, and we were all feeling broke!

By Saturday, I still had no energy, but when my Green and Gold Tri Suit arrived with TEAM AUSTRALIA emblazoned all over it, the butterflies landed in abundance. By lunch time the next day, I would have finished the Race! In the best shape of my life, I figured 3 hours would see me across the line and anything under that could mean a podium. All the hard work had been done and all I needed was to come to grips with the heat.

Arriving at body marking, I was completely focused, despite Steffi announcing half an hour earlier that she was pulling out of the race. Her focus is Ironman Hawaii next year and with less than three weeks to the first step in that dance, she thought better of risking it all on Haleakala's lava rock!)

The morning flew by and with a churning stomach (nerves mean you are looking forward to it and if you are looking forward you will do well right? Right?) I found myself lining up among the pros at the start line. Don't ask me how that happened, one minute I was chatting with Jenny and Mike Tobin, the next we were in the countdown to the 9am start. The Pro's take pride of place at the shoreline, out front of the Age Groupers (ME!), because they are generally faster swimmers and tend to stay ahead of the pack! I on the other hand, swim like an epileptic and belong on the sand dunes when the gun goes off! At least standing among the pros in my green and gold suit got me on the video!

Plunging into the breakers I quickly remembered why I don't belong up front at the start. Instead of swimming, I spent the first 250m just trying to survive as the pack clawed its way over me. When the first lap eventually ended, most of the pack had taken a swing at me and

the second lap was less painful. Unfortunately, thanks in part to the beating I had received and also thanks to the helicopter blowing me backwards at times, it took me 8 minutes longer than usual to complete the 1.5km swim course. After 34 minutes I dolphin dived out of the breakers and made my way to transition, 338 places behind the leader! At least I wasn't last. That honour went to another aquatically challenged athlete a mere 40 spots behind me! Slipping in to my bright green cycling shoes, with the TV camera focused squarely on my bald head, I glanced up at Anna and Steffi who urged me on. Once again I had made the video, but this time I was in my element.

The ride was 70% climbing up the aptly named dormant volcano Haleakala (House of the Sun), which suits the lighter riders and the descents were frightening, perfect for morons with no fear! For the first hour I climbed and fought my way through hoards of crappy riders blessed with a strong swim. Hills that should have been ridden had to be run as the 'swimmers' struggled to find traction in the rough, loose conditions and blocked the track from all sides.

Not knowing the course made it hard to pace things and following the reigning world champions advice, I didn't overcook any of the climbs. Lava rock was strewn across the track and my hardtail Raceline beat the living shit out of me both on the flats and steep! Keeping the back end straight was a chore and passing riders on one particularly fast and rough downhill, I lost my line, strayed from the track, hit an unseen lump of rock and found myself floating past them at head height! I prayed for a safe landing and got it (along with a squeal and a mouthful of abuse!).

It's hard to describe the bike course, it is unlike anything I have ever seen. Imagine millions of jagged bowling balls, covered by billions of jagged cricket balls, covered by trillions of jagged golf balls, all thrown onto the trail and all as loose as hell! Crashing at speed here meant certain hospitalisation! Feathering the brakes relentlessly I constantly scanned ahead for the smooth line that never arrived. Eventually I stopped searching for a rhythm and just let it all hang out. It was a wild ride!

After 2 hours (about 15 minutes more than I had expected) and over 220 passing manoeuvres later, including more than a sensible amount of block passes, I hit transition in a whirl of dust and gravel. The last guy that I had passed ran in behind me yelling "You Aussies are Phsyco!" and marvelling that I had dared the course without dual suspension. What can I say, disc brakes and too many head injuries mean going fast down hill is easy!

Unfortunately, all the running in bike shoes during the initial climbs had aggravated the blisters that I'd developed two weeks earlier at the Double Dare triathlon. The final climb had been particularly uncomfortable and changing shoes in transition, bloody socks highlighted the extent of the damage. This wasn't a training run though, and pressing on was the only option.

By the first of five water stations, I was struggling in the tight technical terrain, a place where I usually should be making ground! The next stretch was about 1.5k on soft, course sand. This section was the nail in my coffin. A 50cent sized animal on my right instep popped and filled with sand! every foot fall felt like I was stepping on an angle grinder at full speed! Trying to minimise the pain I ran on the outsides of my feet, which simply created more blisters. I pushed as hard as the pain in my feet would allow, but simply couldn't reach top speed. I concentrated on everything else in an attempt to shut it out, but that didn't work. Instead of leaving every ounce of energy on the course, I crossed the line with plenty to spare, in absolute agony and feeling cheated! I was so filthy on myself for the stupidity of the last race and the effect it had had.

About 20 people had passed me on the run, which took 57 minutes for the 11k. Half of the stage had been on paved roads and 45 minutes should have been very achievable, even off the bike. I was miserable and still feel hollow from the race. Despite fears that the 33 degree heat and 95% humidity would be my biggest threat, I had handled that side of things pretty well (I'm out of biddens though Rod, and need a new cluster and chain, and a wheel alignment.....you might want the bike for a week.). I finished 14th in my age group and considering it was only my 4th Triathlon, I guess I should be happy with 143rd outright (from a field of 379), but I was half an hour off my own pace for that distance and capable of much better. I am stoked that I raced though and just getting here has been a buzz. Everything in the lead up has been an improvement and the friends I have made along the way are irreplaceable. I have to give a monster thank you to Anna and Steffi who cheered their hearts out for Ali and I all the way. It makes all the difference.

It's three days later and I still can't walk, so I have changed my flights and plan to be home for the Triple Tri in Canberra and the Max Race a week later. My legs are pretty fresh, so if my feet heal, look out for me at the start line with a big smile on my face!

Angry Man

