

DECAHAWAII 2004.

Every year the world is mesmerised by the narrator of the Hawaiian Ironman. The event - a gruelling 3.8km swim, an enormous 180km bike ride followed by a marathon 42.2km run. In slow motion the world follows each step, the pain, the torture and when the narrator asks 'why', the athletes voice-over echoes like a god, "Because I can".

Every two years there is another event that the world never hears about. Called the Decatriathlon it incorporates a 38km swim, a 1800km ride and a 422km run – yes that's ten times the Ironman distance. When asked 'why' I would want to do this race the answer was the same – "Because I can". Or so I believed.

At the Deca in Mexico 2002 my confidence had taken a painful beating. 2am on day 12 I sat up in my tent. My elbows were on my knees with my head resting on my forearms. Defeat was seeping through my system like morphine. I tried to keep going. Getting up, I limped to the toilet. Gina, my girlfriend and sole support crew, cried a little - she could see what was happening. Walking back from the toilet, I knew the event had beaten me. I overcame a swim longer than the English Channel, severe sinus pain, an 1800km bike ride, diahrea, stomach cramps, constipation, severe sleep deprivation, and just 220km of run/walking. The foot pain, the blisters, the swelling and inflammation had taken its toll, I had slowed to a painful limp. The event had pushed me into a corner and crushed me, I was beaten, broken and knew that I wasn't going to make the 14 day cut off. After two weeks of hell, my official result stated: John Reidy – DNF (did not finish).

When asked why I would go back the answer is even easier: "Because that ridiculous excuse for a race pushed me in a corner, beat me black and blue, took all my money and left me there with a crappy t-shirt, a DNF, and a painful memory of everyone saying – good job". Yes exactly, clap, clap for mister handicap. Why? Because I was pissed off, and I wanted revenge. I was going to the next Deca and I was going to find that weak part of my mind. I was going to push it into a corner and belt it around until it said, "yes masta, I can masta, I can do that masta, just for you masta".

My base work started in Cairns. Three weeks on the bike emulating the distances they did in the Tour De France - over 3000km in 3 weeks. Even being put wrong side up over the bonnet of a 4-wheel drive wasn't enough to deter me from my goal. The base would be followed by a ride from Sydney to Dubbo – 530 km non-stop. The run preparation would peak with the National 24 hour run championships. Placing 2nd in the event with 184km - I was ready. As for the swim training, tell some one who cares, flap your arms around enough and you're going to eventually get there.

Deca Hawaii, the race was on. Diving into the water the arm flapping began. After 10 hours I was regretting the lack of swim training. Less than 38km in my whole training program wasn't smart for a 38km swim. I was however still in 5th spot and would have to flap it out. The Italian fish Fabrizio Botanica would be first out with a world record split of 10 hours and 15 minutes. Not far behind was team Australia.

Yes, there were two other Australian's crazy enough to take on this challenge. Brock McKinlay a prior National Ultra Triathlon Champion, and an upcoming talent by the name of David Critini. Brock got out of the water in 3rd place, David in 4th and myself in 5th with a swim time of 14 hours.

I came here to play at the top and to do that I was going to have to play the sleep deprived game. I went the first night without sleep. Brock and David had a couple of hours sleep and by morning we were all going strong. Brock was leading with David and myself duelling for second place. The serious players were preparing their attack. The current leader of the Ultra circuit, Pascal Jolly was chasing strong, and with a 150km deficit on the bike, the Triple Ironman World Champion Luis Wildpanner began his challenge.

Luis had turned up with an army of 12 support crew - and I mean an army. Luis held a high rank in the Austrian military, his team of army personnel had all the technology you could imagine - in shifts they took care of their man. Despite the deficit they were still confident he would ride and run past the entire field and break the world record of just over 8 days.

My girlfriend Gina was my sole support crew for the entire event. Like a well-oiled machine we interacted well as she passed me food and drinks on the fly. I was determined not to slow, even to the point of peeing on the move.

I should state that peeing as you ride is a difficult task. You pull the legs of your nicks up, your willy-wonker pops out under the bottom end, then you point it backwards. You need a downhill section because it's difficult to pedal and wee at the same time. When it starts, 'aahh' you roll and wee. If you're lucky it won't go on your shoes. It also gives you something to study on your next loop – achieving a straight fall pattern is a very difficult task.

As the sun set for the second night, we were all forced to stop – 'what the...' The organisers called the race to a halt, stood on a car and started talking about all these organisational problems, it sounded like they were going to call the race off. I was annoyed, every one just looked on in disbelief.

I had prepared for this in my mind, well not exactly this, but I was prepared to overcome any obstacle. Although this wasn't my body letting me down, it was still an influence that could stop me from achieving my finish. If they couldn't organise, I was going to have to step in, "what do you need" I asked. More excuses came out, "what do you need" I said a little angrier. The problems started to become evident. Some role delegation followed. Gina became a team leader for the food as other crew stepped in to take over the management role from the organisers.

I was annoyed that I had to become part of the management team as well as race, but if that's what it took, that's what I had to do. Before long, stories of insufficient food started to circulate. Not just that, apparently the flies were eating more food than the athletes. I had to step in to control a dispute brewing after two assaults occurred – with 50 people living in each others lap, tensions were brewing out of control. On top of this, the insufficient lighting on the bike course made the potholes impossible to negotiate. And of course you had to simply grin and bear the fact that portaloos do actually fill up. Patting down the previous persons poo isn't fun, but when you have to do a number two, you have to sit down to do it. I apologise for the images

currently rolling around your head, just thank your lucky stars it's only in your head.
Pat, pat, pat, job done, back on the road.

After overcoming the problems of management, we were back on track. Into the second night I was still in the top three and looking good. Come 2.30am my direction to Gina was to only let me have 2 hours sleep - she stayed up to make sure I didn't sleep in. After two hours sleep at 4.30am she woke me, "John you have to get up now".

After 40+ hours of pushing my body it had thrived on the rest, but 2 hours just wasn't enough. I needed a little more sleep. "One-twelfth" I said to Gina. Although it made no sense to her, in my mind I was asking her to let me sleep for another 20 minutes.

"What are you talking about, you told me to wake you up."

"One-twelfth" I repeated getting a little angrier. How she couldn't understand that I needed an extra 20 minutes sleep was beyond me. How could I make it any clearer, I paused then in a slow and controlled voice I said, "one... unit!"

"John I don't know what you are talking about, you asked me to wake you up, just two hours you said" she was getting a little upset.

I was really annoyed. I needed an extra 20 minutes sleep and as far as I was concerned I couldn't have made it any clearer. Angry, I got out of bed and straight on the bike, I was still wearing my bike gear. Riding around, my mind slowly came back to reality. I started laughing when I realised that the comments, 'one-twelfth' and 'one unit' made no sense at all. Then tears started to well in my eyes. I then started to laugh because I thought I was going to cry. Then all of a sudden tears poured out of my eyes as I started to sob. What was happening? I sat up on the bike and rolled back into transition. "I need another 20 minutes sleep" I finally said to Gina and took an hour.

I was up with the sun, and for hours I was riding along smoothly. For hours after that however, my head would drop as I gazed into nothingness. This annoying cycle

continued, up and down like a yo-yo. “Just keep going” I said to myself and pushed on.

On night three with just three hours sleep under my belt, the direction was the same, ‘just two hours sleep’. Again Gina did as directed and woke me up after 2 hours. “John, you have to get up, you have to get back on your bike”.

I sat up staring at nothing in the darkness. I knew Gina was there, and I knew I my bike was there, but nothing made sense.

“John, you have to get back on your bike now” Gina repeated.

I was dumfounded, I had no idea of what she was talking about, the comments made no sense at all. “What do you mean I have to get back on my bike” I replied.

“John, you told me to wake you up, you have to get back on your bike and ride”. Gina was getting annoyed, she new how important this was to me and she couldn’t make me get up.

“I don’t understand, why do I have to get back on my bike”. It was an honest question. It was like I was in a trance. I had no idea what I was doing there and one thing’s for sure, there was something very unsettling about being told I had to ride a bike.

It took another 20 minutes of coaxing. “John, you’re at the Deca. You have to get up and ride your bike. It will be morning soon. Eat this... Drink this...” Eventually I was back on my bike but not feeling well at all. After an hour of flat rolling around this painful loop, I gave in again. Rolling back into transition I took another hours sleep. It was becoming evident, I just couldn’t function on two hours sleep - more sleep would have to be written into my routine.

The extra sleep had knocked me back a tad, but I was still in 4th spot. David Criniti was also having troubles, his leg was playing up and would eventually force him to withdraw. I felt for David, I had the DNF last time. It wasn’t a good feeling paying

out \$1250 USD to race, then ending up with nothing but a crappy shirt and a DNF. David would later give his crappy shirt to Gina and was left with nothing but a DNF.

The last time I ran with a guy who impressed me as much as David, I was telling every one he would be a world champion. A few years after saying that, Peter Robertson went on to win his first World Title. David outran Chris McCormack at the Forster Ironman and was just one second slower than Peter Reid in the run at Hawaii (and he had to stop to go to the loo). David is by far the most talented athlete here and although it may hurt a little to accept defeat, his body and career is far more important. Remember the name David Critini, he will become one of Australia's endurance greats.

The other Aussie, Brock McInlay could ride a bike like a daemon and was setting a strong standard. Luis Wildpanner, the race favourite was living to expectation also. Luis had an aura about him. He was strong and was riding through the field like a world champion, his army of supporters jumping and pushing him towards this world record. No one took on the challenge of Luis except for Brock. Brock had no idea, just that this guy was going to challenge his lead and he wasn't going to roll over and let him have it. It was the larrikin against the methodical unrelenting assault by the army. Hit after hit, the duel continued for days.

Both riders were on target for world record splits on the bike. To everyone's surprise Luis took some extra sleep, sticking to his schedule and gave the record to Brock who was off the bike and started on the 422km run. It was obvious Luis wanted the world record and was determined to stick to his schedule. Everyone was saying he would do the 422km in around 50 hours.

Then after the extra sleep Luis was off the bike and on the run, but not running well. Was he playing games? What was he doing? He definitely wasn't running like a world champion. Before long it became apparent, the duelling had taken its toll, he was broken, a few more attempts saw his run diminish into a broken painful walk. The favourite was out – Luis Wildpanner withdrew.

With an enormous lead Brock was running and walking steadily, this event was his to lose. All were saying that the 24 hour lead on the bike was unbeatable. Mario Rodrigues from Mexico had placed second in the Deca before and was a good runner, but 24 hours was a big deficit. Completing this would see The Italian Giacomo Maritati achieve a Guinness book world record for doing 31 Ironmans in a year. He was also a good runner, but even further behind.

As the event continued and all got onto the run leg, the destructive power of the Deca became evident. Brock's run had diminished into a painful walk – but he kept fighting for his lead. Mario and Giacomo were staying strong, but they were still along way behind.

As for me I had put some extra sleep into my routine, trying to find the right balance, it was obvious I wasn't handling the sleep deprivation well. A group of us got off the bike very close to each other. I was in 11th place, but all athletes from 5th to 13th were within reach of each other.

I walked a good 20km then ran/walked the rest of the first marathon. I had a shorter sleep that night, I woke up psyched - I was ready to challenge for 5th placing. I had placed 6th at the Ultraman World Championships in 2000 and wanted to go better. My second placing at the Nationals, achieving 184km in 24 hours, reinforced my confidence. I began running at a good rate but played it smart by walking the hills. I was starting to look good again. My confidence began to build, but then it happened... again....

My next episode was a little weird. Sleep deprivation has a way of messing around with your mind. Earlier in the race Jason Sawyer, an English athlete, nearly rode off the course to avoid the passing Police car. There was no Police car, it was all in his mind. Then it was my turn. I had knocked up an additional two marathons. I had been going strong all day, and all night, and was fighting the need to sleep.

Suddenly Rob Holmes, another English athlete asked me if I was okay. "I'm fine, and you" was my reply.

The reason for his concern was because I was bent over in hysterics. I was standing their talking to a tree beside the course. It was obviously telling me some really funny jokes, which I can't recall. I would bend over in hysterics laughing, and then laugh back to the tree again. It was obviously very amusing at the time, and I would suggest that if a tree were telling you jokes, you would probably find it pretty funny also.

Fatigue and sleep deprivation had obviously gone the next step. I had misconstrued the sounds from my headphones as comments coming from the tree. I was amazed by the concern from Rob. I looked at him a little strange, wondering what his problem was. As far as I was concerned, talking to the tree was completely natural, and even more so, this tree was obviously a really funny tree.

When I replied to Rob letting him know I was fine, I gave him a look of concern. There was obviously something wrong with Rob. After he passed, I finished my interaction with the tree then shuffled past him at speed. I gave him a look as if to say, 'Don't worry about me mate, you should be looking after yourself, asking all these stupid questions'.

For many laps from there on I would come across Rob, each time he would ask me if I was okay. I was beginning to become seriously concerned, he obviously wasn't handling this race well - the fact that he kept asking if I was okay was evidence of that.

In reality, I was coming to the end of my tether. The fatigue and sleep deprivation hit hard that night. I went to sleep and didn't wake up for 5 ½ hours. The following day, my run was broken, my walk was painfully hard and my desired 5th placing was slipping away. For the entire day I only managed to limp another marathon. My blisters had blown up, popped, blown up and popped again. My right ankle had swollen and the muscle that lifts the toes had failed. My knees were beginning to swell and every time I tried to push it, my left hip would spasm in pain, almost as if someone was sticking a knife into it. Reality set in, my racing was over. All that was left was a broken body and a finish line over 200km away.

I looked around. I wasn't alone. The majority of the field was broken into a painful walk, their injuries were wrapped and strapped to keep their bodies together. A visit to the doctor would have them all in bed for a week. That wouldn't happen, there was a finish line waiting. All would run, shuffle or waddle on as best as they could.

Pascal Jolly, the current leader on the Ultra circuit was shuffling up towards the leaders, could he challenge from so far back. But then in the middle of the night he was caught cutting the course. He was sleep deprived also, perhaps he went looking for other trees? Pascal was out, disqualified.

Mario and Giacomo were closing in on Brock. Brock's unbeatable mood had changed into a 'pissed off' fight for survival. He fought sleep deprivation and tried to out walk the challengers. The feet pain, the blisters, the swelling were becoming painfully obvious. The end result of his effort was the painful reality of the Deca. Mario would eventually reel in Brock and put another 17 hours on him to win with a time of 9 days and 2 hours. Giacomo, the Italian, would catch Brock in his last marathon and go on to place second with a time of 9 days and 13 hours.

With a finish time of 9 days and 19 hours, Brock would eventually hold on to 3rd place. In his strength of mind it was obvious he wasn't happy that this race had broken him down to a weak walk. He had the win and his body just broke down, he was unable to hold off his challengers. The reality however – it was his first attempt and he managed a world record bike split and a podium, well-done Brock, awesome performance!

That same broken demeanour that disappointed Brock was evident in a lot of athletes. Although I continued to battle the pain, my list of problems grew bigger and more debilitating. The rest of the race became a challenge for survival and a lesson in crisis management. I intermixed walking with as much shuffling as my body could handle. Efforts were intermixed with Ibuprofen and voltarin for the inflammation, bandaging for the blisters, strapping to hold the toes up for the muscles that didn't work anymore, basically whatever it took to keep my moving. Nothing seemed to work.

The most notable problem however was the pain in the feet that increased with every step. Jump off a two-story building and you might just begin to understand this foot pain. Despite the unwavering dedication from Gina, she couldn't carry me around the course. Each lap seemed a painful eternity. Gina started to become concerned, "I can't watch it happen again" she said with tears of frustration. I couldn't understand it, was I at threat of another DNF? As with last time, the 14 day cut-off seemed to approach faster than I could have imagined. History wasn't going to repeat itself, not this time, not without a fight!

The approach to the finish of the Deca seemed even slower than the footage of the Hawaiian Ironman, and a lot more painful. I can still see those Ironman images on television. The comment, "because I can" never had more meaning. Every year thousands of athletes line up for the explosion of Ironman events, and most feel the glory of success. Every two years 20 to 30 people line up for the Deca, a large percentage feel the pain of a DNF. The scary reality, more people have flown into outer space than have successfully completed a Decatriathlon.

With just 24 hours until cut off, only 11 of the 25 starters had finished. I was still moving, the finish was so close, but it would have been so easy just to stop, so relieving. Then one by one, on the final day, athletes began to limp in. Despite the 14 days of torture, finishers still managed a joyful smile as they came across the line for that one special finish photo. For most, a finish photo they will never pose for again.

After 13 days and 7 hours, it was there, the finish I had desired for two long years. I would be one of the few who had conquered the Deca, and I was going to get the finish photo to remember it by. I had to have Gina in the photo, she was the one who pushed and pampered me every step of the way.

"I never want to forget this" memorable was my request to her. Then on my final lap Gina joined me just short of the finish line. She strutted out of the darkness with a big grin to reveal her sexy black lingerie. The arm and leg warmers were put on to promote the dominatrix appearance, then came out the whip she and team Sawyer put together. The final metres showed her dragging me by the ear, whipping me towards the finish line. With one final pose for the camera's, I soaked in those few seconds of

glory that come with the finish line. As they say, when you cross the line, nothing else exists. The pain has gone, everyone is happy, you're smiling from ear to ear, you're a Decaman. I did it.... We did it!

I watched as other athletes came across the finish. The first women, Saraya Oliver had also failed on her first attempt in Mexico. She finished that night and was honoured with the title of Female World Champion. The American Rob Abicus, a story of strength, he was limping from the moment he got off the bike. No-one thought he would make it - he limped in with just a few hours to spare. The American Eileen Steil, a little overweight, nobody thought she could finish, also just short of cut off she proved them wrong. Then the final finisher, the Italian Vincenzo Catalona, he was written off when he got off the bike three days behind everyone else. He pulled out one of the quickest run legs to finish within an hour of cut-off. In the end there were 19 names to add to the Deca hall of fame. It would be the biggest list of finishers ever and an experience I will remember for the rest of my life.

In my first Deca story, I offered a philosophical perspective. Simply put "how do you know what you are capable of achieving unless you test your limits occasionally? In taking on the Decatriathlon challenge I discovered new limits. In mind - they are beyond the fear of failure. In body - they are beyond the demands of the Decatriathlon. In spirit – there is no finish line, there are no boundaries and there are no limits - just life's experiences.

I have a new perspective for this story. Simply put, "Shoot for the stars. Even if you don't achieve your goal, you may just find yourself on top of the mountain. It could just change your view of life!"