

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

I once heard Peter Brock say, “If you bite off more than you can chew, then start chewing like hell.” My entry into the Decatriathlon World Championships was an example of “chewing like hell.” For those not familiar with the event, it is a triathlon with a 14-day cut-off, incorporating a 38km swim (similar distance to the English Channel swim), an 1800km bike ride and a 422km run. I should also mention that the swim is in a 50-metre pool, and the bike and run legs are on a 1.8km loop. Everyone said I was crazy but I’ve been called that before....

Once, when I was scheduled to compete in a multi-event competition in Colorado Springs USA, I noticed the entry form included bull riding. I rang the organiser who confirmed that they were real bulls, and that no specific qualification was required. I was psyched.

“Great, I want to enter the bull riding,” I said.

“Okay,” he replied and gave me the entry code.

“And the saddle-bronk, is that the bucking horse one?”

“Yes,” he answered, tuning in to my inexperience. “You know – people die doing these events.”

“Yeah, that’s okay, I really want to ride the bull.”

“Okay,” he said and gave me the code for the saddle-bronk.

“And the steer wrestling as well.”

“You’re from Australia, aren’t you? Will you bring your own horse?”

“Why do I need a horse to wrestle the steer?” (I didn’t own a horse).

“You catch the steer from your horse, then you wrestle it.”

“Ohh.” I mentally calculated my speed in relation to that of horses – could I manage alone? But then again, the horse detail was probably one of those expected things...

“Okay, I’ll skip the steer wrestling then.”

My introduction to the world of decatriathlon was similar. I had already been selected in the Australian team to the Olympic Distance World Championships, which were held in Cancun, Mexico on Saturday, 9 November. When I discovered that the decatriathlon was being held the following day, a short flight away in Monterey, I decided to do both – despite not being fit enough for either event.

The Cancun short course was fun as I prepared my mind for the task ahead. The challenge began when my flight to Monterey departed while I was still in line at the airport. After an unappreciated side-trip to Mexico City, I arrived in Monterey the morning of the race. I made it to the swim start, and after the standard medical examination, hemocrite test and explanation of race formalities, I was ready with a few minutes to spare.

I was sharing lane four with the Swiss competitor Beat Knechtle. Finishing this event would see him break his own Guinness Book World Record of 28 Ironmans in a year. On his section of pool deck was a line-up of water-based drinks, gatorades, salt-replacement drinks, cokes, milk products and foods ranging from fruit to full meals. Behind this was a medical kit that would make any paramedic proud. Beat was undergoing a range of medical and body assessments by his support crew.

Gina, my girlfriend, was my sole support for the entire event. She laughed shakily as she placed my three bananas (purchased at the airport that morning), and powerade bottle next to Beat's supplies. "Is there anything else I could get you?" she asked. I was now officially concerned. As with the bull riding, my inexperience was far too obvious....

I had drawn a bull named Spyder. Checking him out after the draw, I was happy. Sure he was big, but at least he didn't have horns. I only became concerned after overhearing gossip in the stands, "Did you hear: an Australian who's never ridden before has drawn *Spyder!*" A friendly Canadian explained the joke. Apparently Spyder was the only world ranked bull in the stock, he had never been ridden for the full eight seconds, and they had cut off his horns because he had gored too many people. Oops.

Bang! The gun went off and I was hammering. Swimming the first 3.8km in 62 mins, I knew I was going way too fast. At 10km I was beginning to understand ultra rhythms, and swimming nicely. By 20km I was going great, I knew I had it. Then all hell broke loose.

The physics was simple, but I had no idea. Eighteen people were swimming 38km in a 50-metre pool. I wasn't getting out to pee, and neither was any one else. The high levels of urine mixed with the chlorine to form a nasal burning reaction, as bad as my worst hayfever fit. I was the first to start sneezing. My defence strategy was to stop every 500 metres for a 15-second refreshment break. From here, an aggravating rhythm emerged. Five seconds into my break, I'd start sneezing, lose my mouthful of banana, then sneeze

for 75 metres of the next 500m set. As each sneeze is preceded by a quick inhale, you can imagine the frustration of trying to swim and sneeze at the same time.

In a time of 13 hours 22 minutes, I was second out of the water behind French triathlete Didier Woloszyn. I was already shattered, facing the 1800km ride. I tried force-feeding myself between sneezes, then lay down for thirty minutes at the bike transition, hoping the sneezing would ease. Beginning the bike leg – pedal, sneeze, pedal, sneeze for three laps – I pondered my situation. I wasn't fit enough to challenge these leaders, I just wanted to finish. A few hours rest wouldn't hurt in a fourteen-day event. I lay back in my tent to let the symptoms ease. Three hours later I emerged – now in eighth spot. On my bike, pedal, sneeze, pedal, pedal, sneeze, 'damn it'. I couldn't afford to stop any more. Then – halfway around my first lap, the gases in my stomach had built up. I looked behind, no-one on my tail – I let her rip. Oops, I got a little more than I bargained for.

I should have known this was coming, I had been to Mexico before. On a trip to Tijuana, I just had to try a Mexican 'taco'. That night, alone in the YMCA shower facility, I felt the gases build. Pssshhhhhhhhh – I looked around in amazement as my bowels let out a gush of furious anger. The entire shower area changed colour (it wasn't pretty). Damn those water reduced nozzles.

I wasn't happy as I rode out of my saddle to the next toilet facility. My sunnies broke as I ripped off my helmet. The eruption into the toilet was like Krakatoa; surely ships were tugging at their ropes on the other side of the world. I was semi-relieved until I realised there was no toilet paper. I could only shake my head – what else could possibly go wrong?

The sneezing persisted for the first day. The diarrhoea lasted five more days, the throat infection came on day two and lasted a day (at least the other competitors had this, from the pool). Stomach cramps arrived as the diarrhoea left – this was the worst. The cramps were joined by constipation that lasted to day seven. My strongest discipline, the bike, had been cursed by a string of illnesses.

On day eight, I felt pretty good and started to move along nicely – finally. By now I was in thirteenth spot, and all the main contenders were well into the run leg. After 7pm on day eight I finished the 1800km ride. The next competitor was fourteen hours ahead, the rest 24 hours and beyond. But I could see that all but the three leaders had been reduced to a weak walk. I could still do this, and do it well.

After a few walking laps to warm up, I began running. I was doing two laps to their one, I was flying – well, sort off. Two hours later, I thought it wise to ease off and walk, then prepare for multiple of run-walk intervals (this was a 422km effort).

I then discovered why the majority of the field had slowed to a walk. The ligaments in my knees felt really weak, there was some swelling and pain. I tried to run again, but it wasn't going to happen. My confidence copped a severe kick in the gut (careful, that Mexican food is pretty powerful). I did the sums, walking. It's going to be a long haul, but it is still achievable.

After 80km I needed to check my feet. I pulled the tape off and '*psstt!*' Like the squirt of a needle, jets of pus shot through the air and over my shoulder. Gina squealed and ran for the medic. "No, no, no," the medic stammered, fiddling with a needle and thread as he tried to avoid the spray.

An event like this gives you strange opportunities to ponder. For example, I was currently looking at the two smaller toes on each foot. The blisters had blown up to the point where each toe was entirely encased. Floating on top of the blister was the toenail, its base and all. Would a toenail grow back if it were ripped off in its entirety, including the base from which it grew? What good is a toenail anyway? Go on, I thought, take a stand, rip of the nail base and all, cast it into extinction.... I was swivelling it around on its belly of pus. "No, no, no!" The medic motioned me to prick the blister, then he wrapped my toes in cotton wool and taped my feet up again. I was ready to run....sorry, walk again.

After 48 hours I was hurting but still on track. I didn't have nine pairs of shoes like the other competitors but adapted by cutting away the entire top portion of my only runners. This helped for a while. Then my foot padding ceased to function. I felt I was walking on pure bone. The periods of walking grew shorter and shorter, three laps required ten minutes rest. I did the stats, calculating that I would have to walk about 22 hours per 24, to finish within the timeframe.

Reality hit like morphine after 72 hours. It was night, I was sleep-deprived, my feet were unbearable. I had to sleep so I took an hour. I didn't realise it as it was happening, but the event was crushing me, the cut-off time was approaching faster than the finish line. The decision to have another couple of hours' sleep was a breaking point in disguise – I reasoned that the extra sleep would help me recover. When Gina woke me, I sat up, my elbows on my knees, my head resting on my forearms. Defeat was seeping through my system. I tried to keep going. Getting up, I limped to the toilet. Gina cried a little, she

could see what was happening. Walking back from the toilet, I knew the event had beaten me.

It wasn't until that moment that I realised I would get an official DNF (did not finish). I put my mind to fighting this and still I was beaten. I looked to Gina, she was upset. How do you handle such a defeat?

The answer was in the past. Like the day I rode that bull. He was strong, damn strong. My legs parted like a gymnast, smack! he hit me hard, so hard I walked with a limp for days. The force of the first buck smacked some reality into me. The second buck sent me into mid-air. His third buck passed over my beaten body beneath him. By his fourth buck I was already on the other side of the fence – did I mention I was quick?

Spyder, his record undefeated, went on to the World Rodeo Championships in Las Vegas later that year, while I limped away, severely beaten. Despite the defeat and the limp, I walked away with a sense of accomplishment. It was a positive memory that I would carry with me from then on. This decatriathlon would be much the same. It beat me, crushed me, there is no doubt about that. But Gina's disappointment was unwarranted. I walked away knowing I had given it all that I could. This event, these competitors were strong.

Beat Knetchtle ended up breaking his own Guinness Book World Record. Fifty-four year old Frenchman, Guy Rossi further entrenched his title of doing the most Ironmans ever – he can't recall how many, but the number includes six decatriathlons. French-Canadian Emanuelle Conraux, who was seven hours behind me out of the water, finished the bike leg five days later in second place. The next day he was leading, and went on to win by thirteen hours. He was already finished when a group of us were photographed walking down the straight, hundreds of kilometres to go. A spectator commented that we looked like the walking dead. As one of the walking dead, I didn't withdraw but limped on to the fourteen-day mark having completed just 240km of the run. Eleven starters made the official cut-off. All these men and women, including my DNF associates, go into my memory as examples of strength. I am honoured to be associated with these athletes.

People have always called me crazy but I don't agree. I have done so much, yet others have done so much more. In Colorado, I met a bull-rider who had broken 120 bones in 100 rides. A Hawaiian surfer once showed me a six-inch fin slash, two months old and still open – he didn't believe in hospitals. Rock climbers in Texas live on \$3 per day, just to

climb all day, all year, every year. These people could be titled crazy, but I don't believe they are. There is a lot to learn from the mental strength of extremists.

The day after the bull ride, I jumped onto another beast in the saddle-bronk event and managed a place on the podium. And if I decide to do the decatriathlon again, I will conquer it. I will prepare for as many variables as possible. I will be smooth and constant throughout the race, and limit myself to twelve hours' sleep. I will have a dozen pairs of shoes, and I will be prepared for run leg. I won't be one of the walking dead. I will be confident, I will be experienced, and I will be ready. And when my toe nails start to float, I will rip them off, base and all, and cast them into extinction.

I don't think I'm crazy. My philosophy is simple – how do you know what you're capable of achieving, unless you test your limits occasionally? Perhaps it is a little crazy to bite off more than you can chew – but going the extra mile can be a very rewarding experience. You should try it some day – there is another deca planned for 2004 at Virginia Beach, USA – enjoy.

John Reidy.