

WORLD CUP TRIPLE IRON, LAKE ANNA STATE PARK, VIRGINIA

7TH, 8TH and 9TH October 2005

7.2 mile swim, 336 mile bike, 78.6 mile run

After our 20 hour journey from England we were pleased to be met by our host and support crew, Carl, at Dulles Airport, Washington. After a short stop to buy food, we soon reached our home for the next few days, a cabin in the grounds of Lake Anna State Park, a short distance from the start of the race. Something to eat and a long sleep was necessary after our long journey, and the next morning we felt much better. We had a few days to become acclimatised before the race start and managed a visit to historic Fredericksburg, the site of many of the major battles of the American Civil War.

The course at Lake Anna is the most beautiful of all the settings for the Ultra Distance Triathlon races anywhere in the world, but the course is also the most difficult. It takes place in a forest with mature trees about 80 feet high, spectacular during the day, but pitch black at night. It is also up and down hill with very little on level ground.

I managed a daily ride through the woods, to make sure that both the bike and I had survived the journey.

Although I was confident of my bike riding skills, I had not been able to do any running since the British Ironman Championships in July when I had damaged my Achilles tendon. Despite all my efforts, it had refused to heal. All the training I had been able to do was a few short walks. I could not wear my running shoes, but could walk in a pair of hiking boots. I also hoped to be able to run downhill. Race day was fast approaching. It had not rained in this area of Virginia for the past 6 weeks, and the lake was very low. I was tempted to try a swim, but patches of green algae, so thick they looked like green paint soon dissuaded me.

Thursday night we had the briefing and introduction to the other competitors, mainly young Americans, with a few from France, Germany and Switzerland and Sergio from Brazil. I was the only Briton.

Up at 3 am on Friday (it was raining) for a start in the dark at 7 am. It was calm and off we went and I could just about see where I was going. I tried to swim easily right at the back, I knew there was no hurry and the main aim was to conserve energy at this early stage and just manage to survive the swim. About every hour I stopped for a quick drink of energy drink to keep up my strength.

I swam easily in the calm water, but when I was about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through the swim, it started to become much colder and the waves started to rise. The rain, which had been

steady since the start and which I had hardly noticed, became very heavy, so much so that I could not see where I was going. Luckily, we were near the end, sometimes I could see a body pass me going the opposite way, so I assumed I was on the correct course. We were more or less parallel to the shore so I should be alright. I noticed that the referees' boat had been blown onto the shore. The waves became heavier and the swell larger, not much further to go or I would not have survived the swim. Eventually, the end - onto the shore after 6 hours 18 minutes. Change, something to eat and drink and onto the bike. The rain became torrential. It was going to be an even longer and harder ride than ever before, especially as the officials tent and other shelters and all the food had been blown down.

The bike

The storm, which was apparently a northern off-shoot from Hurricane Katrina, would soon cease, or so I hoped. The rain lashed into my face making it difficult to see. Normally the forest through which we ride is quite spectacular, but now the 80 foot high trees were shedding their leaves in large numbers and with the rain running down the road in rivers, I was worried about crashing, and it was fortunate that no one did crash during the event.

I passed the body of a 6 foot long Copperhead snake which had been crushed by a truck on the road. I hoped I would not meet too many of his brothers at night during the run. I managed to ride about a hundred miles before it became dark. My support crew were at the bottom of the climb passing me coffee and soup which I drank and then dropped off the cups before the climb and, as at this point I was only going at walking pace, it was an easy manoeuvre, however, this would not be possible in the dark. As soon as night fell, it became pitch black, with only our cycle lamps to light the way, and especially difficult when you were blinded by the headlights from passing traffic. My eyes started to close with the beating they were taking from the heavy rain. I felt as if I had 2 black eyes, and indeed it looked like that. The Doctor said it needed "cold compresses", but this was obviously impossible whilst riding.

Halfway, I decided to stop for 2 hours sleep. It was still raining heavily and hopefully when I awoke dawn would be close. I laid down in my wet clothes in the tent and was instantly asleep. If I was lucky no one would wake me. After 3 hours I was awake, but I could hear the rain lashing on the tent and hoped I had been forgotten, but no such luck. A cup of coffee, some Ritz crackers and cheese, and soup and off I went. There were not many riders on the track now, just a few hardy souls keeping going. Soon it was light, but the rain remained. I noticed that a number of support crews had abandoned their shoes for bare feet, rolled up their trousers and were paddling ankle deep in water and mud at the side of the road. The day slowly passed and eventually the last few miles, then I was off the bike. More food then onto the run. 28 hours 40 minutes for the bike. I had punctured with 10 miles to go, which added to the general misery.

The run

I had damaged my Achilles tendon doing the British Ironman in July and it refused to heal, so I had done no running for nearly 3 months. Only in the last 3 weeks had I managed a few one mile walks round the streets. I could not wear my running shoes, only a pair of hiking boots which would protect my feet. I started off walking a few laps with Cris, one of my support crew. I had hoped to manage at least half a marathon before dark, but because of the delay caused by the rain and strong winds I could only manage 2 miles. In addition my feet were very soft after 34 hours in water. However, I did manage to keep going all night, walking up hill and running down. The woods were full of deer, but the rain kept them under cover, also the Copperhead snakes I was pleased to note. Eventually daylight came, my second night on the go. I felt alright, but my feet were now very sore. I ate chocolate bars, Ritz crackers and cheese, bananas, tinned pears and soup, and drank tea, coffee and 7-Up. I decided the Doctor had better have a look at my feet, which were covered in blisters. He said, "I was in the Special Forces and we used Duck tape and super glue". As he was tending to my feet, I fell asleep for a few minutes as it did not hurt a bit. Carl and I were now left to do the last 20 miles. Rather surprisingly, I felt quite good. My tendons did not hurt, I was running well and I would soon finish. It was now dark again, the third night, on and on I went. The course looked completely different at night and I was not quite sure where I was. However, Carl was keeping me company in his car and stopped at each turning point to show me the way. He said he hoped I would not wander off into the woods to look for bears. Eventually, at about 1 am, I finished by the light of Carl's headlamps. It had taken 67 hours (32 hours for the run). I would sleep in the plane on the way home.

Thanks to the world's best support crew – Mary, Carl and Cris – who got me across the finish line, and to Steve Kirby and his crew who provided a superb event despite all the difficulties. See you next year.

Men's Results:	1	Beat Knechtle	-	Switzerland
	2	Garrett Mulrooney	-	USA
	3	Jamie Patrick	-	USA
	4	Arthur Puckrin	-	Great Britain