

Emily Chong, Hongkong #66

Coming back from DNF, Austria eXtreme Triathlon

July 16, 2019

I remember the surprise of being told I only had just over an hour to run 10km to the next checkpoint. I remember thinking maybe I could make it, and set off at a strong pace, passing a few people who were dragging their feet en route. I remember turning a corner and coming face-to-face with an uphill section that was too steep to run, and it went on and on, relentlessly for several kilometres. I remember half trotting, half trying to zig zag to make the gradient more manageable. I remember the sky getting dark and rain starting to fall. I remember getting to the penultimate checkpoint in the dark and being told I was 6 minutes too late to continue. I remember disappointment, but also relief that I could lie down after 16 hours of upstream, uphill and headwind.

That was a year ago.

I decided there and then that I was going to go back to tackle it again with more preparation and a better plan. A year later, I was back on the start line - stronger and wiser.

22 June 2019 - Race day

2:30am
Wake up

2:30 - 3am
Breakfast of matcha, penne Bolognese leftover from the night before and some chocolate - for caffeine, carbs, and a slight laxative effect (learning from last year's racing with "congestion" experience).

3am - 3:20am
Get into swim stuff, prepare goggles, apply lube, take bike and kit to the car.

3:30am - 3:50am
Arrive in the dark to the sound of frogs at the race start, rack bike and set up transition (head torch lit).

3:50am
Pep talk from my coach Helen who'll be the crew car driver. Assemble to walk to swim check-in.

4:30am - The Swim. Altitude - 0m

On the countdown from 10 to 1, people either jumped or slid into the 16 degree water frantically crawling against the current towards the bank side of the river. A stray elbow hit me square on the nose and it would continue to throb for the next 2 weeks. I thought wearing neoprene socks would be a good idea as towards the end there would be an area where you have to walk across thick mud and I didn't fancy getting a puncture wound on my foot. However, this wasn't such a good idea after all as I'd never trained in them and they soon filled up with water even though they were under my wetsuit. As soon as I turned at the first buoy and was swimming with the current, I rolled over and took a minute to pull them off and flung them at a kayak...

SWIMMING AGAINST A STRONG CURRENT IN RIVER MUR

The front pack disappeared into the darkness and I cruised downstream in the middle of the river where the strongest current is, conserving energy. Following specks of green lights on top of buoys (surprisingly easy in the dark), the 1.9km turning buoy soon came into sight. I knew I had to beeline for the bank in order to get out of the current. I angled myself aiming for above the next buoy so as to compensate for the current and swam flat out towards it. Two days prior to the race, when I did a recce swim, I wanted to know how fast the current was, so I swam directly in the middle upstream at my max pace (about 1:25 per 100m) and found myself stationary... That feeling of getting swept away did momentarily cross my mind, but luckily for me I've done these kinds of perilous swims many times. Practice stops panic as they say, so I literally swallowed the sense of fear and focused on pushing hard. When eventually swimming along the bank, I could see spectators' feet while everyone was swimming single file like lemmings. I stuck to my strategy of drafting as much as I could, pushing to overtake if there was a gap. Sometimes my hand would touch the silt or gravel at the bottom of the river, and sometimes my arm would get caught on overhanging branches.

1.9 km upstream felt like an eternity. I knew the current would gradually get stronger even along the bank as the inlet approached - I experienced it the other day at the recce swim. Eventually there were only two guys next to me in the pack and they looked exhausted. I took the chance to push forward, staying as streamlined as possible and got out of the swim exit in daylight at 14th place overall (according to my crew) with a time of one hour.

5:30am Transition 1

RUNNING OUT OF T1 IN CROCS TO AVOID WEARING OUT CLEATS OR SLIPPING ON GRAVEL

Unlike regular long distance triathlons, there was no changing room, but the no nudity rule also didn't exist. There were a dozen people in T1 from the front pack being stripped and changed by their crew. I saw rather too many "full moons" and more... My crew did the same, as practised - wetsuit / swim stuff off, body talced and bike kit on. The weather seemed to have held and it was warm enough and dry enough to not have to set off in wet bike kit.

5:40am The Bike. Accumulative elevation: 4000m

The first 50km was flat and flew by, I averaged about 34kph, took in 2 bottles of water, a gel and bar. Helen and Nadia were supposed to meet around this point, but were held up behind cyclists and their crew cars on narrow roads, so I didn't see them until 70km. By then I had run out of drinks and food, so I shouted at the car "I need a gel and a bar! Give me a bottle!" Nothing makes me more grumpy than being hypoglycaemic...

My strategy for the bike was to stop as little as possible and carry as little as possible, taking full advantage of the format of having a support car. In total, I got off my bike three times to pee, therefore only taking less than 5 minutes of stopping time over the 187km bike leg with close to 4000m of elevation. I also had a different bike setup than last year, with 650b wheels (easier to regain momentum when you hit the steep climbs), disc brakes (so I could descend like a demon even in torrential rain), tubeless tyres (no need to carry a puncture repair kit or spare tubes) and a shorter crank length that is more suitable for me. Last year I felt very sleepy in the afternoon and quite hungry at times. So I decided to be precise in nutrition and hydration, taking an electrolyte gel every hour and an energy bar every 1.5 hours (as experimented on all my training rides), along with caffeine in the form of a can of Tenzing diluted with water every 3 hours. I also spent many, many hours this season on the turbo trainer and spent my half-term week riding long climbs in Andalucia and in Lanzarote.

I suspect it was thanks to a combination of all of the above that the bike leg seemed much shorter and “easier” than last year. To put it into perspective, it took me 11 hours last year to complete the bike section, and it took 8hrs 53min this year without feeling shattered.

Bike Checkpoint Gaberl. Altitude: 1545m

The first climb called Gaberl was 20km long with gradient starting from 7% and building to 10%. I did a recce ride of the last 8km the day before, so it helped to remind me what to expect. I reached the first checkpoint 1.5hrs ahead of “schedule”. The next 2 climbs merged into one and I was staying at a similar pace.

At 154km, I turned down a road that led spectacularly up Solkpass, a 13km climb that starts at 10% and quickly built to 14% - the kind of gradient that makes people have to ride zig zag across the road to stay on the bike. The sky was getting darker and darker and the distant rumble of thunder now sounded pretty close. With a flash of lightning, the sky opened up and out poured furious rain. Fog was also closing in now that we were above 1200m of elevation. Perhaps it was just as well I couldn't see the top (or barely 5m in front of me). Slowly, slowly I ground the bike up the mountain a metre at a time. Rain was pooling in my shoes, and running down my face. It didn't make sense to get changed yet, so I waved the crew car away and said I'd get changed at the top. It took quite a few more minutes to reach the top at 1790m, where both sides of the road were covered in snow and the temperature had dropped from high 20s to about 10C.

Bike Checkpoint Solkpass. Altitude: 1790m

My meticulous packing and labelling now became crucial, as waiting in the car boot, Nadia found me the “Bike Wet kit” bag and “spare bike kit” bag. I had a 10km descent to do, and riding down wet would definitely mean hypothermia (as I tried before at Aix en Provence 70.3 last year, lesson learnt). Even with a waterproof cap under my helmet, 2 rain jackets, arm warmers, waterproof over trousers and neoprene gloves, it was still chilly riding down. I was really pleased that I chose to get a bike with disc brakes - torrential rain and hairpin bends would have been lethal (I found out the next day there were a few crashes, one resulted in a DNF)

3:10pm - T2. Altitude: 700m

SETTING OFF FROM T2 ACROSS A DAM

I arrived at T2 around 3pm, 2 hours before cutoff, and to my surprise, ahead of the crew car... What can I say, the joy of disc brake descending? While waiting for Helen and Nadia, I took the opportunity to stretch, drink and go to the portaloos (this was the part where I lost the precious 6 minutes to the cutoff last year, so this year I did a lot of adjustments involving probiotics to avoid stomach congestions). Nadia eventually ran into the gazebo with my “run kit” bag - hydration bladder pre-filled, socks pre-talced, a swift change of clothes and I was off on the run.

3:30pm - The Run. Accumulative elevation: 1800m

I was still an hour and a half ahead of cutoff, but I dared not dilly dally. My legs felt a little heavy, but at least my shoes were dry and the rain starting to ease to a drizzle. The first 7km wound through people's back gardens in thick mud and through very steep undulating mini hills. I didn't want to blow my calves, so where it got very steep, I took a longer route and zig zagged it. My aim was also to make up as much time on the down hills and on the flats

picking up cadence. I passed a woman who was ahead of me on the bike while she was rekitting with her crew car. At 11km I saw the crew car and switched a water bladder and took off my rain jacket. At 17km, I made check point 1 still with 1.5 hours to spare.

From last year, I knew the next 10km starts flat and suddenly becomes very steep for quite a while. I kept to a conservative pace and once it got too steep, I adopted the ultra technique - walk. Focusing on lifting knee and driving with glutes, a Belgian athlete and I charged up some 3km of steep ascent. Me telling him how I once climbed 430 flights of stairs to train, him telling me this was his training race for something bigger... just as we ran out of topics and breath, the downhill bend approached. I gestured we should start running, but he wasn't quite ready yet.

PHOTO BY MRPHOTO.AT

I tried to use the downhill to my advantage as much as possible, pausing only for a few seconds for a cup of chicken soup in the only feed station of the race. On the way down I started to pass others, including the lead swimmer Claudia. I patted her on the back and gave her a thumbs up. Most people had now adopted the walk / jog / walk technique. I still felt quite fresh and buzzing from the caffeine (which I don't take in my normal daily life) and only walked the very steep parts. The next checkpoint was the one I narrowly missed by 6 minutes last year so I was determined to not waste any time.

I approached the corner leading to the checkpoint and checked my watch, I was still 1.5 hours ahead of cutoff! I did a fist pump and congratulated myself (which may or may not have been timed perfectly for the photographer.)

6:30pm Checkpoint Silberkarklamm. Altitude: 1020m

From this checkpoint at 28km, it's mandatory to have an accompanying runner to the finish. Nadia was in her kit ready to go. Helen, my coach replenished my water and food supply while I had a road side pee (I worked out how to pull my shorts aside to pee standing up without having to pull my shorts down... #usefullifeskill). She handed me the "last check point bag" in which I took some arm warmers and a pair of clip on snow spikes. Nadia and I hugged her before jogging off into the woods. We wouldn't be seeing her till the finishing line!

After a few kms of technical scramble through thick woods and steep ascents, we popped out on to a road where we enjoyed a small section of flattish run between guest houses. Knowing that we still had 1000m to climb, we knew this wouldn't last long. By now I'd run out of the gels I was using on the bike and took some of Nadia's stash, and started on the Haribo cola bottles. I could do with some caffeine too, but knew there wouldn't be any till the finish...

8:45pm Glosalm. Altitude: 1510m

To the next check point at Glosalm was a long steep gravel climb followed by a hill side muddy ledge. A woman and her male partner passed us just as we got to Glosalm. The sky was getting quite dark, and the temperature was dropping, so we stopped to put on head torches, arm warmers and a jacket. The other couple went into the cabin for the loo, so we pushed on.

We jumped across a stream, crossed a wooden bridge and scrambled up jaggy boulders. Just as we lost sight of the signage in the dark, specks of green lights appeared on the other side of a small waterfall... we leapt across to find events crew attaching green lights on to the

signs. They cheered us on as we climbed hands and feet one rock at a time up towards the next green light.

The route then turned into what I would describe as a cow path - steep, muddy, rocky, rutty... I turned my head in the pitch black to catch a breath and came face to face with a brown cow's face, 6 inches from mine! I suppose it was more startled by my head torch... I wasn't sure whether it was because we were now close to 1900m or I was low on caffeine or energy or that I had been "on-the-go" for 17 hours, I was dragging my heels and Nadia was literally dragging me up the mountain.

On the very last climb to the Sudwandhutte, the Belgian guy charged past me, as did the woman I passed in the first 10km and the Italian trio . By now it was a matter of survival and I couldn't care less about ranking. The hut was lit by fire torches and the valley was echoing with traditional drumming in the distance.

Nadia took my hand and one step at a time, following the green lights, the fire glow, the drum beats, we eventually reached the final checkpoint at a mountain refuge Sudwandhutte.

10:15pm Sudwandhutte. Altitude: 1910m

Cheerful staff took our arms and pulled us on to the platform. We were offered a cup of hot tea and plenty of encouragement. "Only 10 minutes to the finish" (yeah, right)! The finish line across the valley was in sight, perhaps less than 2km away, all the climbing was done and all we had to do was descend on the narrow ledge across a snowfield. I pulled on my snow spikes and carefully navigated down the icy path with almost a sheer cliff on one side. There was much more snow this season than last year, so it was a good idea to bring snow spikes.

10:51 - The Finish. Altitude: 1702m

We were glad to finally step off the ice and on to terra firma. Winding down a rocky path full of tree roots in the pitch black, the finish line disappeared for a while, but the cowbells were unmistakable. They got louder and louder, and as we popped out of the woods into the car park, the gantry appeared. A crowd of people, including Helen, lined both sides of the red carpet ringing cowbells and cheering. With Nadia in one hand, I lifted the finisher banner with the other...

All the tiredness was long forgotten. Buzzing with adrenaline, I said into Nadia's ear "You're the best, will you marry me?" And she said "Yes, of course!".

Is sports not like life? A partner who supports you all the way and can get you through the toughest bits surely is a keeper!