

## Sebastian Mikkelsen, DEN, #210 (2016)

### 3.8km (3.6km) swimming in the 14 degrees cold river Mur, at Graz.

The alarm clock rang at 3:00 Saturday morning. Everything was prepared and packed the night before, so I just had to have my morning coffee, some food and then off. When we arrived at the transition zone it was still dark, so we had to use our headlights, to get some light and make me ready for the swim.

When we tested the swim course the day before, the current was so strong that we almost did not get anywhere and I was in doubt, if I could finish the swim part. Therefore, I was very relieved when we came down to the swim-check in and we were told that the course was shortened by the first 200m up stream in strong current. This meant that we started from the riverfront and swam straight to the first buoy, round it and then 2km with the current to the turning point where we had to swim 1.6km against the current again. I placed myself almost directly next to the buoy, but I should probably have positioned myself further up, because when the start went at 4:30 and I jumped in the water, I and the other athletes next to me, were pulled downstream. We tried to get around the buoy, but we got nowhere. I swam in "the never ending pool" until I saw other athletes make the decision to swim down stream without reaching the yellow buoy, then I did the same.

The buoys were marked with a green light and swimmers with a luminous glow stick around the wrist, so you could follow us in the twilight. It was very special to swim in the semi-darkness. When I looked forward to navigate, I could see the lights of the buoys, glow sticks from the other swimmers and a pink sky over the dark mountains.

I used the first 2 km downstream to find the rhythm and I tried to stay in the middle of the river, since my friend and engineer, Martin Atterman, had given me a free lesson in water dynamics (water moving quickly in the middle and slowest on the sides).

I reach the turning buoys much faster than expected. It made me extra excited to see how hard the last 1,6km against the current would be. I tried to keep myself positioned right next to the shore, where the flow according to "Dr. Atterman" would be weakest. I was slowly moving forward, but much faster than feared. You'd think that keeping the same distance to the riverfront would be easy, but there were fallen trees, rocks and other obstacles that I had to swim around or above.

After a while with obstacle swimming, I could see the bridge which was very close to the place where we had to turn right at one of the river's branches and from here to the swim finish. The thought that I despite my doubts, soon would finish, gave me goose bumps and my body was overflowed by endorphins and happiness. When I exited the water, I had to show my emotions by shouting out loud, yeeaaah!, the first part of my race was completed!

My supporters, Cille and Jacob, were ready when I came out of the water and helped me over the gravel road to the bike. Their faces were as full of joy as mine and they were just as excited, as I was.

### **186km biking over 4 mountains with 3900 vertical meters and a temperature of 30 degrees, from Graz to Grossölk**

I jumped on the bike at 5:42 full of physical and mental energy, the swim had turned out much better than expected and I felt invincible. The first 55km were very flat, so I focused on keeping the pulse in the green zone (114bpm - 134bpm), as "Coach Sjøner" prescribed it in my race strategy and take in fluids and energy. It was at that time already very hot, so after about 1 hour on the bike, I began to pour water over myself, to cool the body and head, so I was not overheated like last year at IM Frankfurt, where I had to DNF because of the extreme heat.

We drove the first 70km of the bike route the day before, up to the first checkpoint of 4, which was located on top of the first mountain. So I could get an idea of ??what awaited me, and Cille and Jacob could get to know the first part of the bike leg, which way they should drive and where we could meet for pit stops. After this trip, we were very surprised how poorly the route was marked, but luckily there were many more signposts on raceday, and Cille and Jacob had been very good to navigate and find their way via the directions in the race manual. Sometimes the distance between the sign posts was long, so I was in doubt if I was going the right way. Fortunately I found out which of the cars were supporter cars of the other athletes, so when they overtook me or their supporters stood by the roadside, waiting for their athlete, I was certain that I was going in the right direction.

The first mountain Gaberl with 1551m above sealevel, was the mountain which had the longest climb to the top, but it was not that steep. I overtook quite a few on the way up, which gave me confidence. My pulse went sky high though (155bpm - 170bpm), which was too high compared to what my coach had suggested me. But I was in the lowest gear I had and I continued to pour water over me to cool me and hoped

that it would also help on the pulse. It took me about 1.5 hour, incl. 1 pit stop, biking 20km from the foot of the mountain to the top.

When I got to the top, Jacob asked if I wanted to put on a jacket, as many of the other athletes did, but I was awfully hot, so I said no thank you - stupid as I was. There were 20km from the top to the bottom, where there was a lot colder and I did not had to pedal, so I could not get warmth in my body that way.

When it comes to cycling in the mountains, I can only recommend to do it on a roadbike. Although you can save time and effort by lying down in the aerobars on a tribike, it will not compensate for the comfort you will get on a roadbike. I was sore in my arms and hands from hitting the brakes in almost 20km down the mountain in an awkward position and was overtaken by all those on their roadbikes down the mountain.

Ascending and descending the mountains 2 and 3, I do not remember clearly, but the first mountain Gaberl had taken its toll on my legs, so even though they were not as high as the first, it was still very hard to get up and down from them.

After approximately 155km I hit the last mountain Sölkpass with 1790m above sea level, where I made a pit stop and agreed with Cille and Jacob, what would happen on the way up the mountain. My legs were very tired, I felt terribly hot and I had problems to consume energy (my stomach felt full and I was nauseous). But then I remembered some very wise words, that my club mate from Kralupy, oldboy Kim Minke, had written in a FB comment: "Remember to look to the sides when crisis hits you". It became a mantra for me, which was repeated again and again during the rest of the bike ride (or jogging). Thanks Minke!

From the beginning till the end, the bike course was passing one beautiful and idyllic scenery after another. High snowy mountains, deep green valleys, small running streams and roaring rivers.

The first 5km to the top of Sölk, was the steepest and longest increase so far, where I hit my highest heart rate of 172bpm. Fortunately Cille and Jacob was waiting for me after about 7km, so I could get the heart rate down and be cooled again.

When the pulse had fallen again, I jumped on the bike and continued. The next 5km was not so hard, but suddenly the road got very steep for a very long time. At times I felt that I stood still. My pulse was sky high and I felt sick. I said to myself that I would divide the rest of the trip in small chunks, cycling until the next turn and take a short break again. It was too crazy.

Cille and Jacob was waiting for me at a small parking space at a turn, I do not remember if I cried that it was hard, but I remember Cille looked worried and said that I should just take it easy and take the breaks I needed. I must have looked awful.

This continued the last 10km up the mountain. When I reached the top at Sölk, I was relieved and hugged Cille and got chills throughout the body. I might have shed a tear. At this point I had surpassed the worst of this extreme ironman. Now I just had to finish a marathon!

### **44km run / walk from Strubschlucht to the top of Dachstein, 1910m above sea level**

The descent from the top of Sölk was wild! The road was winding and one steep piece was replaced by another, but it insanely beautiful. There were about 15km from the top of Sölk to T2 (the transition zone from cycling to running). Cille and Jacob was waiting for me with big smiles on their faces. We agreed where we would meet the next time and I changed into some nice dry socks, was handed some liquid and energy, and then I was off.

The run course began with crossing a dam, which on one side was 100m down to the valley floor and on the other side there was an artificial lake with mountains on both sides. An incredibly beautiful sight that I just took some time to enjoy. I ran over the dam and into a wide forest trail, which could fit a car. This was my idea of ??how most of the trip would be. I was overtaken by a slender guy who held a good pace. It was very hot, so I tried to stay in the shade and focused on keeping my heart rate down.

The path led me into the woods, where I was running on a small muddy path that went over a small stream and when I came out of the woods, it went directly up a hill, which was actually a field of cows. I tried to run a few meters up the hill, but I quickly agreed with myself that I should walk up it. The terrain surprised me. I expected the before mentioned forest paths of gravel most of the stretch, maybe small paths the last stretch up the mountain, but not those steep hills and small trails. It was the first time in the race that I got a little idea of ??how hard the rest of the run would be. Fortunately, the trails were replaced by an ordinary road that went down hill. The guy who had overtaken me earlier came towards me again. He said that he had forgotten the GPS as we all were equipped with, so he was going back to the car to retrieve it. Thank God, it was not me!

My legs were very sore and it was hot, but I ran calmly the next 5km to the first place I would meet Cille and Jacob. When I arrived, they were troubled and could not understand that the 10km took me about 1t15min to run. They told me that one of the other athletes had collapsed due to the heat. Surprisingly, I was not so marked by the heat, so I think that my intake of salt capsules on the bike ride and my slow pace had helped me stay relatively well hydrated. I still had problems with consuming solid food. I usually never say no to a Snickers, but I had to pass and stick with cola and energy drinks.

The next 5km was more or less flat and I ran on road and gravel paths. The biggest challenge at this point was the 30+ degrees, the baking sun and my very sore legs were starting to hurt with every step I took. There was not much shade, but I took it easy and were focused on the pulse, fluid and energy intake.

After 20km the ascent to Silberkarklamm began, which was the place where Cille would start running with me. The motivation was dropping when I realized that the first 20km had taken me almost 2.5t to run and ahead of me there was still 24km and 1500+ meter to climb. I had to walk for most of the climb and run / walk, when the road was flat.

Along the way I met some locals and asked them which of the mountains I could see, was the Dachstein. They told that it was not visible yet, it remained behind one of the mountains I could see. Damn! I think that if I could have seen the target / top of the mountain, my spirit would have been higher and I might have been able to run a little more.

The mood, however, rose tremendously when I met a man outside his house, who had a bottle of schnapps in the arm. I asked if it was homemade, to which he answered "yes" and asked if I would have a taste. I said of course, no thanks, maybe tomorrow. Then he pointed in the direction I was going and said something I did not understand until I saw that he had put a bottle of schnapps with 4 glasses perched next to the sign that showed me the way. Suddenly I felt energetic again, enough that I could pick some flowers for Cille, now there was not too far till the last checkpoint, where Cille would run with me the rest of the way to the top.

I arrived at Silberkarklamm pm. 17:47 and had now been at it for 13t13min. My spirit was high and I had a lot of energy. Cille was ready with the backpack and the accessories needed for the last part of the course. At this time I thought that the last 17km would be over around 20:00.

Cille and I started running, but after only 100m I had to walk again. We talked and laughed the first km, until it started to get steep again. We should now run / walk up and around the mountain's side. Cille tried to get me to run, but as soon as the pulse rose above 135bpm I started feeling sick again, so we agreed to run / walk when I could and so we continued the next 10km. My watch runs low on batteries around 33km, which was slightly annoying as the information from it, made me think of something other than the body hurt and how many km still remained. The rest of the trip we used Cilles clock, but without the same information.

Around km. 35 the real mountain terrain began. We went on small paths with large stones along the hillside, with the most wonderful views of the valley and the other surrounding mountains. Around the hillside were cows with bells on. It could not be more idyllic.

At the second to last checkpoint Glösalm, km 40 the time was 20.55. At this point it had taken us 3t6min to pass 12,5km. I was finished, my feet and legs hurt, we were overtaken by several teams, it was crap! It was beginning to drip a little and it thundered. I had such a desire to put sit down, but I did not dare in fear that I would never get up again. We climbed almost up to the last checkpoint Südwandhütte where I did not even have the energy to be really happy. From there we could see the goal, but we still had to overcome the last 2km small mountain trails and over 2 areas with snow, that would be extremely dangerous to cross, if it started to rain more. As we approached the target, we could see Jacob waiting for us. When he saw that it was us, he began to shout and scream and once again I felt shivers chasing through my body, which continued the last 300m to the finish line, where most of the organizers were waiting with bells and chants. Kl. 21:26 Cille and I crosses the finish line together in a time of 16t56min. I got hugs and kisses of all those who were there and got a beer in my hand. Yeeaaah, I was done!

From the finish line, we could see the other mountain where we had been a couple of hours ago. We could see the lights from the other athletes' headlamps, that moved slowly up the mountainside. It was now dark and it rained more, i.e. it would be even more dangerous to cross, especially the snowy areas. I am glad that we finished before it was dark and wet. We ended the day with well-deserved and piping hot pizza!

The event gave me everything I came for and more. I was pushing myself to the limit and moved my boundaries, together with the people I love the most, in an environment that could not be more beautiful.

In the 5 years I've been i triathlon, I have never experienced the same kindness from athletes or organizers. The best thing is the mentality which is the basis for Austria Extreme, it's not about finishing in a certain time, but about finishing together!

Many thanks to my supporters Cille and Jacob, who helped me through the day. Without you it would not have been possible.