

They say a picture says a thousand words. Let me paint you my story.

A cloudy day on a muddy bank in Belgium. 750 athletes line up and watch the elites frantically start the 3k swim before entering the water for their own epic European Championships. I am amongst them hoping to do well and finish strong. As the gun goes off the bedlam begins with everyone frantically fighting for clear water. As the lead pack settles down into their rhythm a few chasers are left fighting it out. Swimming is so quiet and peaceful; the only sound you can hear is that of your own breathing. Your shoulders begin to ache and your feet numb in the cold water. Stroke by stroke you get closer to finishing. Sitting on someone's feet and drafting, conserving your energy, you begin to feel fresh and attack again. Just as quickly as the swim started it has ended and you begin to mentally prepare for the next discipline; cycling. I exited the water in 47 minutes. Giving me a good starting platform against my European challengers.

Disoriented and drained you dig deep and get on the bike that over the next two hours and 80k you will begin to bond with and eventually hate. Pedaling fast, the fine spray from the riders in front, mists over the road ahead, blurs your vision. Positions jostle back and forth as the strong swimmers and weak bikers fall back and the weak swimmers and strong bikers overtake, the strong swimmers and strong bikers just get further ahead. National pride kicks in during these competitions, giving more to beat a rival nation, everyone hates us. As the route snakes through the Belgium countryside around the town of Brasschaat, the crowds swell at every junction watching as the action unfolds, as everyone takes more risks to gain those few extra yards. The course begins to dry out but the clouds above remain angry and ready to burst flooding onto the course in a torrent. Towards the end of the ride my legs are aching and tired, but my mind is still fresh and already running the 20k to the finish. Having slipped a few places I transitioned and finished the bike in 2:14 and still high in the field.

Jumping from the bike you feel fine but your legs feel like someone else's after a few drinks. The jelly legs struggle to find a comfortable rhythm, looking around everyone else is feeling the same and this warms you forcing a smile as the rain begins to fall through the trees on to the path. My legs cramped everywhere; front, back, inside and out as I slipped down the placing, one at a time. Each lap quicker than the last but still marginally slower than everyone else. I finished the run in 1:40 with a total time of 4:45 52. Crossing that line you feel like you have only just started the race and now it has ended 5 hrs later, all you remember is standing on the muddy banks of the lake in Belgium waiting to start, as the clouds gather above.

Coming home and unpacking only to re-pack your bike and kit is sole destroying. All you want to do is train or to leave it to one side to collect dust as you vegetate in front of the TV. Three weeks till my next race at the World Long Course Championships in France, on paper it seems like a long time, in practice it is over ever so quickly. Rising at 5am most mornings just to get the training miles in before work, easing back into the intensity. All the hard training and gains have been made in the preparation on those cold dark mornings whilst everyone else was sleeping soundly, now was about consolidating everything and recovering in time. It's peaceful and wakes me for my day of work ahead

Having just raced at the European Long Course Championships in Brasschaat, Belgium, I was confident of what I could achieve. I had had the race of my life, coming 14<sup>th</sup> in my age group, in a time of 4.45 hrs. If I could repeat the performance, I would be more than happy?



Arriving at the team hotel with less than an hour until the parade of nations and pasta party, was like transition training, in and out as quickly as possible. As the sea of blue meandered through the streets towards the Main Square and reception, I knew that amongst us there were some national heroes.

Standing on the shores of the lake, huddled together like king penguins sheltering from the cold, all my troubles seem so far away. All that was left was 5 hours of hard competition against the best in the world. As the last of the athletes with disabilities exited the water, you could feel the wave of emotion spread across the field; this was an awe-inspiring sight. As the first wave entered the water, bodies pressed against each other in eager anticipation of the starter's orders. The nerves began to settle.

Once the race started the water frothed and the white horses danced; bodies entangled and collided eager to gain that one piece of clear water that lay ahead. During this commotion one fervent competitor decided to punch me, a shattered goggle lens and a swollen eye later and I was falling back into the chasing groups. As the field snaked its way round the course gaps began to appear as competitors were drawn off line. Reaching half way, you gingerly climbed up onto the pontoon and launched yourself over the other side, hoping to gain more ground and free water. Soon the fields were merging as the wave behind caught us and collectively we swam over the female waves.

Exiting the water after the second lap, with my toes cramping and eye throbbing, I made my way up to the long transition area. With every step my muscles tightened and screamed. Despite the "tussle with the muscle" I was disappointed with the 48 minute swim; it still positioned me in the top 20 though and less than 8 minutes down.

As competitors filtered through transition and onto the undulating bike course, the back markers in the female elite wave raced past and offered something to chase! The first hill hit you as soon as you left transition- a short sharp climb filled with supporters. Before you barely had time to get your feet in your shoes, you turned and followed the road as it swept away around the crowded streets. Positions jostled back and forth as everyone settled into their own rhythm. Competitors were passed struggling with mechanical problems and flat tyre.

Just before the turn around on lap one my aero bottle fell off my bike. This didn't cause any dramas, just inconvenience, as I had to re-plan my hydration strategy for the rest of the race. As you climbed the hill next to transition to start your second lap you could feel the wind pick up and the sun burnt deeper into your shoulders. Keeping my head down and focusing on the guys in front I closed in on other GB athletes, knowing that I would need them around me if I was to pull out an amazing run split. With the wind picking up, more competitors slowed, forming mass pelatons, to which frustratingly none of the referee's seemed to pay any attention. Completing the bike in 2:09 and down in 23<sup>rd</sup> was an achievement, but with hindsight, I know I took it too easy too often. If I'd pushed harder I'd have possibly gone under 2 hours.

The un-sheltered, uninspiring road run was a 3 lap out and back, which drained all that you had left. My first lap was quick, but I paid the price as I cramped on the second, it was the supporters and other GB athletes out there that got me through. As I began the third I passed other athletes looking more strained and dejected, spurring me onwards. Coming down to the last kilometer, another GB athlete whose friendly rivalry at previous races has been up lifting, passed me, passed me.

Feeling inspired I upped the pace and tried to stay with him closing to within 10 meters as we entered the finishing chute. A run split of 1:40 gave me another 4:45hours this year



and put me into 35th. Competitions start the day you enter the race, not when the claxon sounds, or the gun fires but they always end when you cross that line proud of your achievements. Staying until the last man crossed the line. In the bar after the prize giving many stories were exchanged about the days' events. A chance to look back and reflect on the seasons achievements' so far.

Splits:	European	Worlds
Swim	0:47:18	0:48:51
T1	0:02:29	0:03:38
Bike	2:14:36	2:09:00
T2	0:00:54	0:02:57
Run	1:40:21	1:40:58
Total	4:45:42 (14 <sup>th</sup> )	4:45:24 (35 <sup>th</sup> )



I know that I wouldn't have gotten here without the support of the Sports Lottery, RAF Tri association and my PEd Flights support. Most of the time the support I received is behind the scenes helping everything moves together in the same direction. Something until late I had taken for granted. I hope to have the pleasure of racing in Almere, Holland next year when the race goes back to being a proper long distance event with 4k of swimming, 120k of cycling and 30k of running just to finish you all off.

Thank you