

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A DOUBLE IRONMAN FINISHER?

Double Trouble as the Slovenian Fister Brothers take on a Triathlon

Story and Photos by **Dušan Fister and Iztok Fister Jr.**

It was a very sunny and pleasant Friday morning in August when we woke up and realized that we were heading into physical and mental torture. Torture that might actually bear fruit by Saturday evening: assuming we finished the race, we – Dusan and Iztok – would become two of the youngest finishers in the world. We had swum, cycled, and run together as brothers for many years, but had never tried to compete together in such a painful experience. We were heading into the World Championships Double Ultra Triathlon – the name sounds intimidating in itself – but the description is much more so.

The Double Ultra Triathlon is a grueling race that consists of a 7.6 km swim, a 360 km cycle and an 84.4 km run. In other words, it multiplies the traditional Ironman triathlon by two. Ultra triathlons are held worldwide by the International Ultra Triathlon Association (IUTA), but the most important fact for us was that it was a race that is held annually in our home village Bakovci, located in northeastern Slovenia. Slovenia is a pretty small country (about 2 million inhabitants) in central Europe and is surrounded by our four neighbors: Austria, Croatia, Hungary, and Italy. The weather in the summer is hot, with temperatures reaching up to 35 °C and that sunny day in August was no exception.

Our decision to do the Double Ultra Triathlon had to be supported by a lot of training, both physical and mental. Our specific preparations for this race started a year earlier, with autumn tempo training. The aim of Double Triathlon training is mainly to gain endurance while keeping a decent pace; therefore, longer training sessions are required. Actually, to be frank, preparation for such a long race really requires several years of effort; first experiencing all three disciplines and then testing your ability at shorter distances. Both of us had more than 10 years of experience as cyclists, marathoners, long distance triathletes,

and swimmers. Those years took care of the issues that all beginners face, such as digestion problems, lack of strength, dizziness, and, most importantly, psychological weakness. If the latter can be overcome with the passage of time, you will probably reach your goal.

Many say that good mental preparation is 80% of success. It is the fuel, which comes into account when your legs start to lose strength. Iztok has already tasted that feeling two times, in 2011 and 2012, when he did not finish the race due to medical problems in the last stage of running. Potentially, he might have had some past experiences and slightly higher chances of success than Dušan, who was on the day of start 21, about 4 years younger than

brother, having no race experience longer than a standard Ironman. However, by the time race day rolled around, we were both feeling confident of finishing and becoming the youngest brothers to do so in the same Double Ultra. The preparation and experience were a ticket to our ultimate goal. But we still had to run the race.

On race day, we first organized our gear in the transition zone where triathletes change for the next leg (from swimming to cycling and from cycling to running). Next, we put our wetsuits on, since the water was a little bit colder than usual, a swimming cap and swimming goggles. This process was quick because we had a large, well-organized support team. Every few minutes, the timekeeper shouted out a number, each one lower than the last. When we heard “Five”, we realized that the start was only five minutes away. While we positioned our swimming goggles and waited for the final countdown to start the Double Ultra, the crowd may have been asking themselves: “Aren’t they too young for this thing?” But, for us, it was too late to think about that, or our preparation, or even our mental state. We were competing at a local race, so everyone of course knew us. The nervous tension was thus even higher, but we were totally sure of success and nothing was going to

bother us. On home turf, we were even more motivated to achieve the goal we had set – to finish.

At 12pm, the starting pistol was heard by the 45 competing international triathletes. The local lake was quickly inundated with wetsuits. The swim itself was actually quite cold, even though many natural lakes in Slovenia offer nice swimming conditions from May to September. The swim consisted of 18 laps. The competitors frequently stopped to refresh themselves with some food or drink, and we were no exception. It took just under three hours to come out of the water, change, and start cycling. Our tactics were to warm up slowly first and then gradually increase the pace. It is difficult to choose the right pace and not to burn too much energy unnecessarily. The majority of cycling was at night; therefore, visibility was reduced. It was cloudy, foggy and very cold at 10 °C, which no one had expected. Personally, we had occasionally trained at night, but never in such cold temperatures. But the cold had a positive side – our legs were cooling the whole time and the pain was reducing. It took us a bit more than 12 hours to complete the 74 laps required for cycling.

After cycling, it was necessary to refresh as much as possible because the toughest part of the triathlon had not even started yet. Running is the triathlon discipline which makes you “iron.” It is the discipline which busts all prejudices and determines the final result. It can make you very proud of yourself – or make you feel lost. Running is the section which can be over and done with in a little over six hours, or can be stretched over 18 hours. It helps you to find yourself through all the pain in your knees, ankles, and feet. When you come so far, you cannot quit just like that. All the hard work had paid off when we crossed the finish line. Even if it is in sandals, like Iztok did when he finished 30th, a respectable 17 places behind Dušan, who came 13th in the Double Ultra.

So what do you get besides a medal and a finisher’s t-shirt?

This is the most commonly heard question

AS A MATTER OF FACT, BOTH OF US HAD MORE THAN 10 YEARS OF EXPERIENCES AS CYCLISTS, AND LATER MARATHONERS, LONG DISTANCE TRIATHLETES AND SWIMMERS





IT TOOK US A BIT MORE THAN 12 HOURS TO COMPLETE ALL THE 74 LAPS OF CYCLING PART. ■■

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the past few years. People focus on what is the point of doing ultra-triathlons. Many people all over the world ask this and want to know what we get from it. Why are you doing it? What is the reward?

As a matter of fact, we always have the same answer: The best things in life are free and no amount of money can buy you a finisher's t-shirt from a Double Ultra Triathlon. You have to finish a race in order to get one. At the end of the day, you'll be thankful for every ultra-triathlon. They teach you the way of the warrior, and can help you to overcome any problem in your daily life. However, finishing is not easy and it takes years and years of hard work and training. When you cross that finish line, though, it is one of the best days of your life. You just cannot imagine the feeling. 🍷

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