

Norseman 2009 Event Report

Mike Mazur (mike@hippiesport.com)

The Leadup to the Event...

The story itself starts more than a year ago when my friend Richie started doing triathlons. He said that it was a blast and that I should try one. To be fair, I had already but that was nearly 20 years in the past (which, if I remember the rule of thumb, is 140 dog years). Now I liked to think that I was still in shape, but I wasn't. Something that



became immediately clear when I tried my first 5km run. I was sore but most worrying were the skipped heart beats and ensuing panic attack. This was not going to be easy. Maybe, I thought, I could start with a small event. Something like the Norseman maybe? It seemed crazy and the idea to try the Norseman came on a bit of a whim. I was on vacation in Canada and started to google 'norway triathlon' and then thought, 'What the hell, go big or go home' so narrowed my search to 'ironman norway.' The Norseman site was the first that I opened and I was immediately intrigued. The 2008 race had just finished but I fired off an email to Richie and suggested that the 2009 event would be an admirable goal.

Convincing Richie that we could transform ourselves from potato chips to ironmen seemed like a daunting task at first. Just how does one seemingly sober, out-of-shape individual go up to another and say, "I've got a great idea, let's do the world's toughest ironman next year" and expect to be taken seriously? It turns out that it can't be done. Fortunately (for me) though, the Norseman has cut-off dates after the initial registration. Not feeling fit by January? Pull-out. Scared shitless in May? Pull-out and still get half your money back. More panic attacks in July? Well then it'll be easy to get a doctor's note saying that you can't possibly do the race without endangering the lives of others. Perfect. This was all the incentive that Richie needed to be convinced of the merits of signing up for the Norseman.

As registration day approached, I developed my plan. I'd register from the office where I hoped the network wouldn't fail. I'd make use of my quick trigger fingers to fill out the registration form and send it off within 5 minutes. I'd even remind Richie (so that I wouldn't be on my own). I had rehearsed. All would be well in world of future ironpeople. What I hadn't rehearsed though, was the confusion when reading the form. Was I considered Norwegian or just a Canadian living in Norway? What was my club name? Being a quick thinker, I registered as Mike the Canadian from team HippiieSport in six minutes flat. Phew! I had made it.



After receiving our confirmation emails, the whole thing started to become real. I'd tell people about the race and then think to myself, "yeah, right." But, after a while, I started to believe that it would actually be achievable - If only I started training. Training started on a whim with runs here and there, an occasional swim, and a bit of biking. Nothing rigid just training with a zen-

like attitude. In fact, the belief that most of the preparation was probably mental anyway made me feel much better about sitting on my ass at work in front of a computer all day. And, of course, surfing for swimming tips and checking out the latest gear online was also completely justified. Swimming tips especially since I hadn't done anything remotely resembling a crawl for 20 years.

Speaking of gear, I should mention that I've always had a 'thing' for bikes. I like them. I like the sounds they make, the silky feel of a freshly oiled (or waxed for the puritans out there) chain, the pings from a freshly built wheel, and the sound of a tire exploding in the back of the car on a hot summer day. Heck, I even like road rash. I just like bikes. Committing to the Norseman now meant that I had the perfect excuse to expand the bike collection from one nice Al Trek to a new carbon road bike and another half dozen time-trial and mountain frames along with an industrial order of time-trial bars and bottle cages. Thanks to record high oil prices, I was now not only equipped for the Norseman but also a full-fledged bike shop (catalog available upon request) on the side.

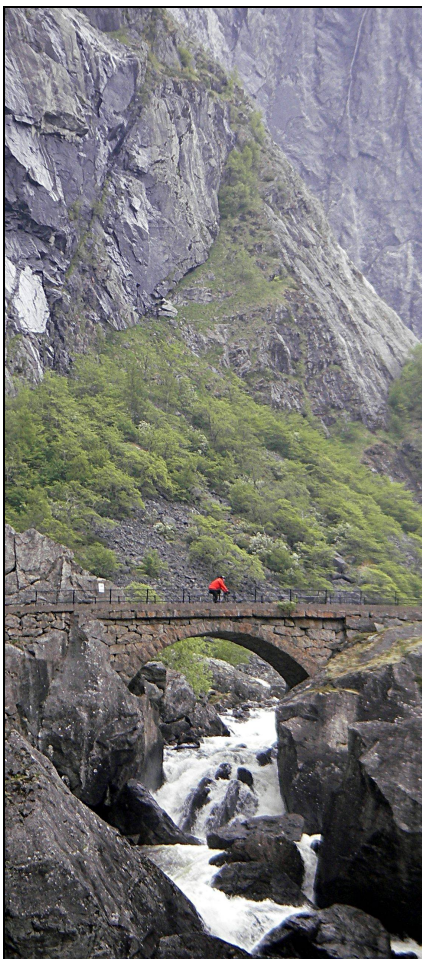
I continued to train through the long and rainy Norwegian winter. The kids would go to bed and I'd go out for a run. Typically leaving the house at 10pm I'd run in the rain and return home for a couple of glasses of soya milk (mmmm...) and bowl of chips and salsa. Hey, if I was going to be an ironman, I'd also need an iron stomach. As summer approached I learned (from a book) how to swim and figured that my technique was okay. I could swim 4km in the pool in well under the cutoff time but the openwater and jellyfish at Eidfjord still concerned me. Especially after doing a sprint distance race in Canada with the realization that I could not, in fact, swim. I could float, but not swim. So, it was with the knowledge that I wasn't going to be

getting my 2000NOK registration fee back that I returned to Norway and took every opportunity to get out into the openwater.

Now although being able to swim is definitely an asset, the other thing that is essential is a good support team. I had originally hoped that my family could join me but, in the end, it proved logistically impossible. A friend from work eagerly stepped up to the plate when I told him of my need for support. Marcus was keen and happy with a good (dry?) sense of humour. And that was exactly what I would need to get me through the event. My recommendation for anyone planning on doing the Norseman, is to focus early on lining up your support. Be sure to stress that it won't be a 'walk in the park' for them but that they'll get (at least) as much out of the experience as you do. They won't regret it. If you're happy, they'll be happy (and vice versa).

Off to Eidfjord...

My intention had been to drive to Eidfjord from Stavanger the Wednesday before the Norseman. This would allow some time for adjustment to the excitement surrounding the event. Unfortunately, I was stressed for a number of reasons (not the least of which was finishing three bike builds the night before) and developed a wicked headache. This meant a Thursday departure at the earliest. Resigned to a 'late' arrival, I went to



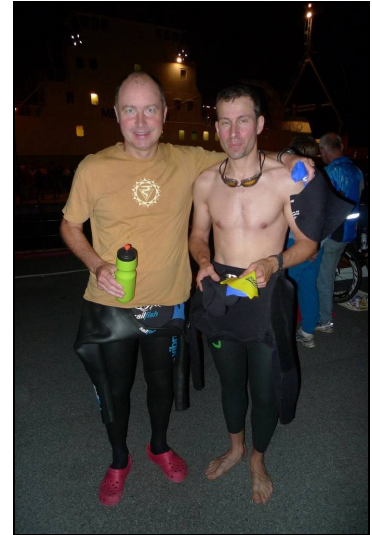
bed and had a great night sleep. The last for a couple of nights.

Waking up early(ish) on Thursday I felt refreshed so started the drive out to Eidfjord. Although less than 300km, the drive would still take about 5 hours due to ferry connections and requisite pee breaks. But it was beautiful. Spectacular. Everything that makes Norway 'Norway' was there. Rocks and trees and water. Once I arrived in Eidfjord I drove directly to a small campsite, setup a tent and put the front wheel on my newly built singlespeed. After my eyes adjusted to the 'vivid' green paint on my new bike, I hopped on and rode up to register for the event. On the way I realized even more that I love bikes and that, since most of my time would be on a bike, the Norseman was going to be a lot of fun. If I made it past the swim that is. And with that thought came the memory of my kids playing with jellyfish from Eidfjord just a few months earlier. Surely, they'd grown into monsters by now and were just waiting for the first swimmers to jump off the boat. I'd be okay, I thought, since I'd be one of the *last* ones off of the boat (and I'd encourage Richie to be one of the first). Problem solved. Pawn sacrifice style.

Race day arrived and, on two hours of sleep, I pushed a cup of gluten-free oatmeal with strawberry jam into my stomach. It was only made slightly more palatable by the isotonic chaser that I felt I needed to drink to reduce the chance of catastrophic cramping during the swim. 3am arrived, so we wheeled our bikes over to T1 for check-in. And, after being marked up with my race number, a friendly norwegian checked the brakes on my bike. Although appreciated, it is worth noting at this point that that was all that he checked. Functioning brakes are critical to safety but so are a number of other things - like, for example, correctly tightened stem bolts. A loose stem could prove disastrous. Definitely something to be avoided but, now, I'm getting ahead of myself.

With Marcus' help I laid out my gear and squeezed into my wetsuit only to realize that the excitement of the moment was not being friendly with my digestive system. So, with goggles in hand, I ran off to find a WC of some sort. Found one, straightened out my nervousness and returned to T1 only to find that I had misplaced my goggles. Presumably they disappeared with my nervousness and would not be seen again. Bugger. I had an old, leaky spare pair but Richie came to the rescue with an extra pair of Zoggs that he had just bought. Yippee! I'd be able to see the jellyfish after all. So, we finished suiting up and climbed onto the boat for the long ride out to the drop-off point.

The boat ride was nice and gave us a chance to realize just how fit the *other* competitors were. There's just something about tight fitting neoprene that can make even the tubbiest body appear ripped and intimidating beyond belief. Presumably we too looked like ironmen. But were we ironmen? What about the jump? Up until this point I still hadn't decided whether I'd jump off the front of the boat or take the 'chicken door' on the side. But, after peering off the front of the boat, I quickly reasoned that the chicken door would cause less mental stress on both me and the jellyfish so the decision was made. I'd ease my way into the water from the side of the boat. The problem was, no one bothered to mention that you still *jump* into the 16 degree water from the chicken door. So, in the end, the shock is still there. In fact, the only advantage that I can see for the chicken door is that you're in the water earlier than the 'tougher' people and can make your way to the start line with time to spare. Definitely an advantage if you swim like me.





The Swim Begins...

Swimming the couple of hundred metres towards the start line was relaxing and provided an opportunity to watch the others jumping from the boat. Some jumped, others flipped, while many just kind of slid. After a few minutes I started to feel pretty good in the water. There was nothing to worry about. That is until I felt my open hand contact something squishy and jellylike. Looking up, I saw the very thing that had worried me most about the swim. A large, red jellyfish. After trying to sort out the differences between brennmaneter (mean red 'bastards') and vannmaneter (cute little white ones), I realized that I was surely a goner. Discovering that I hadn't been stung, I started, once again, to swim towards the startline. My tactic would be to start on the very inside near the back of the pack. In this way, I wouldn't be kicked or run over and would still have a chance of finishing within the 2 hour goal that I had set for myself. Before I knew it, the horn blew and we were

off! With arms flailing and legs kicking, I fell into a comfortable rhythm in someones draft. I did this for about 10 minutes until my goggles fogged up and I lost visual reference with anything further than a metre away. Although this had the unpleasant side effect of not knowing where the hell I was going, it also meant that I could no longer see the little white jellyfish floating beneath me as I swam along. Another half hour went by until I finally decided that swimming blind was actually no fun after all. So I stopped, cleaned my goggles and was blown away by the view. With the mountains zipping by with every breath and incredible clarity in the cold water I felt renewed. This was the Norway that I had moved to 4 years before. This was the Norway that I now call home. Incredible, but, I still had another 2km to go. So I continued to swim and, as I did, I felt stronger and stronger. I started to focus on my technique and found, amazingly, that I was passing people. Surely that must have been a first for me. So I swam. And, as I rounded the buoy into the home stretch, I focused on the beach ahead. And swam. Towards the wrong beach. After receiving corrective orders from a kayaker I made my way towards the right beach (actually the one on the left) and the first transition. As I did though, I noticed that I had followers. And, in an odd and perverse way, it felt good knowing that I had taken others down the wrong path with me. After climbing out of the water (less than 1.5h after starting) I stumbled into the tranistion area, found my bike, and stripped down. As expected, I was completely unorganized but somehow still managed to dress myself, stick a banana in my mouth and head out on my bike. Only 222km to go before becoming an 'ironman.' Surely it couldn't be that difficult.

T1 < Me <= T2...

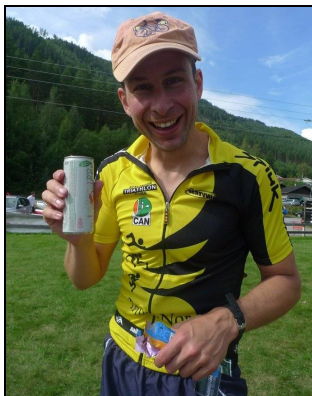
The climb to Dyranut was straight forward and very pretty. The old tunnels presented a few potholes but they just seemed to add character to the ride. At about 8%, the grade was not too challenging but, nonetheless, it did make me start to wonder what lmingfjell was going to be like. The horror stories that I had heard sat heavily on my mind but I figured that I'd worry about it when (if) the time came. By the time Dyranut approached I was hungry and had to

pee so bad that my... well let's just say I was in search of a tree in a treeless landscape. Which, I didn't know at the time was a sign of things to come. I was still 180km and (at least) 8 'comfort' stops from the finish. Was I drinking too much? Maybe.

Riding the Hardangervidda was energizing. I was taking it easy, enjoying the sights and having a great time. The next three hills came and went without much effort. And although they were easier than expected, I was aware that the long ride was taking a toll on my knees. My big worry now was, if my knees didn't explode on Imingfjell, then surely they would dislocate during the marathon. So I took it easy and chatted with people and kept a smile on my face. I was having fun and that was all that mattered. The climb to Imingfjell came and went rather



unspectacularly and then, there was this wind at the top. A strong wind of the type that makes you shout something that rhymes with 'clucking bell' when you think that no one can hear you. I grappled with the wind but I was still having fun. In fact, I even recall laughing hysterically. Not 'bell-tower Bob' hysterics, just having a good time hysterics. Then came the descent to the second transition. The descent was fast but I didn't push it. I was worried about 'the corner' at the 155km mark and the others that would come. This worry, it turned out, was in fact not necessary. Awareness of the corner was needed, but, I felt that I could have pushed this section of the course a fair bit harder.



T2 and beyond...

After a sluggish change into my running gear at T2, I started off on my own towards the finish. Only 42km to go and feelin' good. It's just too bad that I'd left without enough water. Actually, to be fair, Marcus and I had agreed that he'd drive to the 25km mark and cycle back to meet me with more fluids and food. This, however, turned out to be a bad idea when I ran out of water at the 5km mark with no sign of Marcus on the horizon. I kept my eyes open for streams to fill up at but saw none until, 2km later, I was met by Marcus with bottles in hand. This was a sweet sight and, in retrospect, maybe I shouldn't have sprayed so much of the water on my head but instead drunk it. I guess I'll never know. Anyway, the run to 25km was uneventful and pleasant. I had picked up my pace somewhat and would still squeak in under the 14.5h cutoff at 32km - if I ran up Zombie Hill. At the 25km checkpoint I had a sip of a very weak drink of some sort and a piece of salty, fatty sausage. This combination, it turns out was too much for my delicate tastebuds so I quickly spit it out again. Which leads to error in refueling judgement number two. At this point, we agreed that Marcus would pick up Gatorade from the car and then cycle up to me minutes later while I was on my way up Zombie Hill. Thinking that I could still make the cutoff, I started running up the hill. It was steep but not too uncomfortable. At least not until I had run 2km and realized that Marcus was still not beside me and I was feeling 'woozy' from lack of water. So I started to walk. At first, I wondered if I had gone up the 'right' Zombie Hill but then realized (after he caught up to me in the car) that I was running faster than he could cycle up the hill with a laden bicycle. A lesson for 'next year' I thought. After taking on some water we walked together and chatted but I started to feel miserable. So I did what I hadn't had time to do

earlier in the event - I phoned my kids. For me, this was the most overwhelming bit of the trip. My spirit was immediately lifted and I felt great(ish) again. I resigned myself to missing the cutoff at 32km and enjoyed the rest of the walk up to the checkpoint. Once there, I drank a bit, chatted and laughed with the officials, and then set off towards the hotel. Marcus and I chatted on the long and windy road and just enjoyed the last few kilometres of our journey. I even heard him use the words 'next year' which made the event even more special. So next year (if we're lucky) the four of us (Richie's supporter will also compete) will be back - hopefully at the top of Gaustatoppen together.

Lessons Learned...

Although the experience was incredible and I'll definitely be trying to secure a spot for the 2010 Norseman, I did learn a few things.

1. *Be happy and smile. It'll get you through anything.*
2. *Don't change your groupset the night before leaving for Eidfjord*
3. *Do check all of the bolts on your bike to make sure that they're at the correct tightness.*
4. *Do stop to pick blueberries at the side of the road. They're tasty. If you're serious about making the cutoff times, though, it might not be a good idea.*
5. *Do drink lots.*
6. *Don't drink so much that you need to stop every hour to pee.*
7. *Trust your support and appreciate what they're doing for you. Phone (when it's safe) friends/family if you need to. They'll get you out of your 'funk.'*
8. *Plan for a 'bit' of extra time on Zombie Hill.*
9. *Don't go out so hard that Imingfjell seems difficult when you get to it. It could be very windy on the top.*
10. *Danish kids' music makes you laugh (and hungry when it involves talk of 'pandekager'). Just make sure that you know more than the first 5 words of any song that you decide to sing.*
11. *Be happy and smile. It'll get you through anything.*