

## European Standard Distance Duathlon AG Championships 2016

### Race Report Kate Morris F50-54

After a somewhat lack lustre 2015 due to injury, I targeted the age group European duathlon champs in Kalkar, Germany, as my 'A' race for 2016. With a choice of sprint or standard distances I thought I'd race in the sprint on the basis that the pain would be relatively short lived. But at the eleventh hour and despite an unfortunate sequence of life events rendering her somewhat less than prepared, my mate Ruth Marsden decided to tag along. As she'd qualified for the standard distance (which was doubling as the German national champs) it made sense logistically if I did that too. That and the fact that my race planning tends to be heavily influenced by 'are any of me mates doing it?'.

With our race scheduled for Saturday, we hit the ferry port on the Wednesday evening with a view to having a couple of pre-race days to orientate ourselves. The dude in the security box greeted us with a "Hello girls" (I liked him already), then promptly informed us that there was a chance we'd be breathalysed as we disembarked. A somewhat surprising, yet spookily accurate character assessment of two middle aged women in a filthy VW Touran.

In the ferry bar we had the pleasure of meeting Andy and Rich who were also en route to Germany. Although we'd publicised our whereabouts on the British team's facebook page, other than the boys only Darryl (travelling with his lovely family) joined us. How bizarre!

Thursday and Friday were spent attending the obligatory team briefing, familiarising ourselves with the race route and transitions and trying not to drink the 3 euro bottles of Prosecco that we'd picked up in Aldi.

The event was to take place in Wunderland (don't be fooled by the name, it's an amusement park originally built as a nuclear power plant ... you get my drift ...) and as both the run and bike routes consisted of multiple laps we got to see the delights of Wunderland a multitude of times and from a multitude of different perspectives. Don't ever be tempted to go. Seriously.

Multiple laps of course also means multiple opportunities to see your mates. My training buddies 'Les Brutelles' always decide on a pre-race phrase that we can call out to each other to keep our spirits up. Some of which are un-repeatable, but on this occasion Marsden and I opted for "Ooh ... 'ello Dave!" (Sorry Dave). By the end of the race we had replaced this with a sideways glance that read something more along the lines of "God I'm bolloxed". But we started off with good intentions.

Race day came around all too quickly and we were up with the larks in order to return to transition to make final preparations having racked our bikes the previous evening. I was thrilled to bits to have the opportunity to chat to one of the Irish girls in my race - Hannah Shields. I'd read a BBC report about her - she'd summited Mount Everest and was the first Irish woman to ski to the arctic - crikey, you do get to meet some pretty awesome people doing these things! My gleeful "Ooh hello ... you're Hannah aren't you?" was met with a startled look that read "who's this chuffin nutter?" Still ... I think she warmed to me. Whilst I filled my fluid bottle with Mountain Fuel Extreme Energy, she munched on hers - a snickers bar. I could only presume that picking the peanuts out of her teeth gave her something to focus on other than the pain.



The ladies standard distance start time was 2.15 and we pulled up in the car park with plenty of time to spare. This provided us with an opportunity to view the Irish girls rather elaborate warm up from the comfort of the car. We heckled them out of the window: "You lot are gonna completely knacker yourselves out doing all that!" Their retort was "Pah ... just giving you lot a fighting chance!". Touché!!!

After our completely lame by comparison warm up we made our way to the start line. I glanced around and noted that quite a few of the girls were wearing base layers and gloves and I started to wonder if I'd

made a wardrobe faux pas. The wind was up and there was a serious threat of rain. Oh well ... too late to change anything so I turned my attention back to the race. I was surprised by the general lack of argy bargy and found myself standing right at the front! The hooter went off (or someone shouted "GO!") and I found myself trotting along with my new BFF Hannah. We were soon joined by another Irish girl, a fellow Brit and a German (Claudia) who was in the same category as Hannah and me. The run course consisted of 4 laps (10k) around the 'delights' of Wunderland - it was pretty twisty and turny with a switchback each lap and a good chunk of it into a head wind. I figured that my best bet was to stick with the pack and gain some solace from the wind so I tucked in and took my turn at the front from time to time. The heavens opened on the third lap to which the inevitable "Ooh – typical British weather!" was met with a chorus of "Yeah we're used to it – doesn't mean we like it!"

As we chugged along together it dawned on me that with two of the girls in my category running at roughly the same pace as me, the podium positions were likely to be decided on the bike leg. So in an un-characteristic display of forward planning I thought I'd ask them how they fared on the bike. It transpired that Hannah was (quote) "shite" and Claudia was "alright", but she was better on the run. Although my run isn't too sparkling at the mo as I've been a bit over cautious with the training after last year's injury, I knew my bike had improved quite a bit so I allowed myself a glimmer of hope that I had a punt at the gold medal!

I pulled away from the others a little bit as we approached transition (inside what appeared to be a disused storage facility), made a bee line for my bike and grabbed my helmet. Oh balls ... something was amiss, I didn't recall my helmet having a visor! Then as any multi-sport athlete will tell you, other than a flat tyre the absolute WORST transition nightmare one can possibly have is a 'WHERE'S MY BIKE?!!!' moment - ARGH!!! I frantically charged up and down the line of bikes and thankfully located my trusty steed in what seemed like an eternity, but was probably just a few seconds. Still plenty of opportunity to cock it up though and cock it up I did. You name it I couldn't get it on, or off!

Finally I was out on to the 40k bike route which consisted of 4 pancake flat laps – numerous 90 degree turns and two switch backs per lap. It soon became apparent that my debacle in transition had cost me lead position ... by rather a long way. Claudia had gained a few hundred meters - she must have been like greased lightning in transition!!! Clearly the Germans apply the same precision to their transitions as they do their engineering. Still ... I put my foot down and caught her pretty quickly. Despite my loathing of multiple lap courses, they do give you the opportunity to neb the opposition and make adjustments to your pacing accordingly. By the



time we reached the switchback at the end of the first lap I hadn't put as much distance between Claudia and myself as I'd thought I would have. I had to keep my foot on the gas.

I'm not a fan of multiple lap courses so in order to make it bearable I mentally divided the bike leg in to eight sections. By section five the two uppermost thoughts in my mind were: "Jesus Christ this is tedious" and "my arse hurts". But at each switchback Claudia was falling further and further behind. I wasn't entirely sure where third position was, but certainly not between the two of us so I cast that conundrum from my mind.

As I approached the end of the bike leg I knew I had a decent lead, but I needed a smooth transition and nothing to go 'ping' on the second run for that gold medal to be in the bag. About half a kilometre from transition I overtook Hannah – a fellow Brit. I didn't twig the significance of this until I entered transition to be greeted with the announcement that I was not only leading the 50-54 category, but that I was currently first British lady!!! I knew Hannah was a marvellous runner and thus my glory was to be short lived, but sod it, you give an old bird with a tendency to show off an audience and she'll give you a show. I smiled and waved and generally made a tit of myself as I weaved my way back to my transition spot. Hannah was racked opposite me and she arrived within nano seconds. What a pair! If the crowds of supporters had been treated to a master class in smooth transitions by the Germans, they were about to witness 'how not to do it' by the pair of leading Brits - neither of us could get our blinkin helmets off! I fumbled with the clip with my numb fingers, getting more and more frantic and staring



anxiously at Hannah as she did the same with hers! In desperation I yanked as hard as I could on my chin strap in the hope that the thoughtful Rudy helmet design man had inserted a piece of elastic that magically appeared in such dire circumstances and allowed you to pull your helmet off straight over your head! Sadly not. On to plan B. Sod it, I'd run in it, lob it in to the Rhine at the first opportunity and hope that didn't constitute a littering offence. But Lo! "Got it!" I squealed, slung the offending helmet in to my box and hot footed it out of transition as fast as my jelly legs would allow. Within a few paces Hannah was on my shoulder, well, it was fun whilst it lasted!!!

The second run was 5k and thus two laps. I decided to try and push to the first turnaround then I'd be able to gauge how much of my lead my second embarrassingly bad transition had cost me. Thankfully not too much, so I was able to calm down a bit and consider my options. I had a couple of worrying 'I'm liable to cramp here' twinges, so I decided that my best bet was to take my foot off the gas and to try and stay as relaxed as possible. The wind had not abated and everyone appeared to be suffering quite a bit!

I put on a bit of a spurt over the final 400 meters and was greeted with the announcement that I was 'European champion 50-54' as I crossed the line and shrieks of congratulations from fellow Sheffield girls Fiona, Caz and Sara who were to compete in the sprint event later that day. Under normal circumstances I would face plant in to the cheesecake that was on offer in the finisher's area, but I just couldn't face it - what a wasted opportunity!!!

The presentation was back in the transition area later that evening. Unfortunately the acoustics were so bad no-one could make head or tail of what the dude was saying! A task made all the more difficult by the incessant chorus of 'Eh? What's he saying? I can't hear him!' Eventually we managed to figure out the order of play and by the time the 50-54 standard girls were announced I was fairly certain that I needed to take my place up on the podium. I stood behind it flanked by the German girls in second and third position. I turned to greet second and horror struck. . Who on earth was she? I'd never seen her before in my life! Clearly the same thoughts were running



through her head as there was zero recognition on her face! Oh ... my ... God. One of us had made a rather embarrassing mistake and I sincerely hoped that it wasn't me! They presented the medals in reverse order and I was so, SO relieved when they announced Claudia as second lady and that defo wasn't the lady standing to my right! It transpired that she couldn't hear a thing either and thought they were presenting the sprint race medals!

Sunday evening saw us back in the ferry bar with the boys exchanging race day tales. As the beers flowed Marsden and I took it upon ourselves to grace the lads with an abundance of old lady pearls of wisdom. These included the instructions never get married, never have babies, never get a mortgage and don't be a doctor. Basically anything that requires a degree of commitment or interferes with your training. They seemed to appreciate it.

So, a result beyond expectations for me and a highly respectable 9th place for Marsden who cramped badly on the bike leg and hasn't yet started her 2016 training schedule (if you can kick off your training with a top ten finish in a European champs it really isn't a bad start)! Brilliant results for Fiona, Sara and Caz in the sprint race – respective gold, silver and bronze!

Overall a fabulous few days catching up with old friends and making plenty of new ones. The German hospitality was superb and the quaint little town of Xanten is well worth a visit if you're ever in those parts. And Wunderland? Well ... one can't quite shake the notion that had it ever functioned as a power plant and gone 'BOOM' it wouldn't have been too great a loss!!!!