

XTerra Saipan

Hi everyone,

I hope this summary does justice to the amazing conditions I got to experience yesterday:

The race started at 6:30am. Our hotel is about 2 miles away from transition. I left the hotel and rode my bike to transition at 5am. As I was riding in the the dark, I looked up to the sky and saw a mix of stars and clouds. I still can't believe I'm the South Pacific, nice and warm and no snow! As I get to transition, everything is lit up and the music is getting everyone moving. As the sun comes up you can see how beautiful the water is and the clouds are getting thicker. I'm excited, if the clouds persist, the day will be much cooler with faster bike and run times.

The gun goes off, the swim is on. I fall in behind Daz Parker from England, she's a pro and easy to spot - about 6' tall. I stayed on her feet for the first lap then stalked her on the beach so that I'd have a solid drafting partner for the second lap. The last leg of each lap had a substantial current from right to left. Out of the swim and a short run to transition, once on the bike, the first 3 miles are all uphill, very steep and slow. About a mile in and the rain begins. Now I'm really excited, it's actually cool - cold.

After about 2 miles of uphill on paved and dirt roads you enter the jungle and continue to climb. Now the rain is really coming down. The dirt turns to mud and sections of the bike are similar to riding on ice. Riders are slipping and sliding everywhere. One downhill section is so slick the pros are either getting off and hiking down or sliding off the line and crashing. The bike course starts at the west side of the island and traverses to the east side of the island and then loops back. In one section the mud is so thick that the knobby tires on your bike are packed with mud, you have zero traction and just riding in a straight line is an effort. Then, as soon as you return to a dirt road that is packed down, all of the mud lodged in your tires is then flung up onto your body and into your face. The climbing doesn't end, at least 80% of the time on the bike is climbing, the other 20% you're flying downhill at 20-30+ mph in the rain.

I get off the bike and the fun begins, the rain has stopped and the sun has come out. Less than a mile into the run and Daz Parker passes me. I settle in and follow her, we cross the first major road and then take a right. I'm a bit confused-when I pre ran the course, I didn't take a right at the first road, but, I see the red Xterra arrows that mark the course and remember the race director saying: the courses may be slightly modified for safety reasons. Plus, Daz is a veteran pro from England, she's been doing this for years. Then about a kilometer later we hit a major intersection and ask one of the race marshals where to go. He tells us we have been following the Xterra Lite run course (the smaller triathlon course for beginner triathletes). The marshal tells us to turn around and run back a kilometer and get back on the championship course. Daz is livid, and starts arguing with the marshal, telling him the course wasn't properly marked etc. I just turned and started running back. In my head I'm trying to estimate the distance and time lost to the mistake. Also in my mind is what my brother told me in an adventure race years ago "the majority of the population doesn't know what they're doing, don't just follow someone because you think they know what they're doing, make you own decisions"

By the time we get to the trail, Daz has passed me again and we begin the climb into the jungle. It has been raining for the past 2 hours, everything is wet and slick, wet green moss covers most of the rocks and the ground and is extremely slippery. The next 2 miles are straight uphill through dense jungle, at least 50% of the time you're using your hands to scramble up hills: grabbing trees, limbs, branches, rocks and bamboo to move up and forward. At 3.5 miles it levels off and you have a roller coaster dirt road section and then back into the jungle to climb again. At 4 miles you've hit the highest point in the jungle and begin descending in a jungle river bed filled with lava rock and coral that are all covered in green moss. Nothing in the riverbed is secure, every stride lands on something that moves or is slippery. At this point it becomes a game to see if I can land on something that is solid and keep myself upright.

At 4.5 miles the course turns right out of the riverbed and into a tunnel carved into the rock by the Japanese during WWII. The tunnel is about 50 yards long, 4-5' high and has several forks and stairs in it. When I pre ran the course three days ago it was pitch black, but today, the tunnel is lit with several Coleman lanterns for the race. When you exit the cave/tunnel you are standing on a ledge about 9' above the riverbed, with a rope to repel down into the riverbed and continue the run. Another 1/4 mile and I'm out of the riverbed and on a dirt road descending toward the town of Garrapan. Cross the main road in Garrapan and the course heads north for a mile beach run to the finish.

The run course was the hardest I've ever completed. It was supposed to be a 12K, but I managed to turn it into a 14K. Two of my competitors had passed me during my detour, I was able to repass them in the riverbed before the tunnel and ended up with the win. Today, the race director had an amazing BBQ for all competitors on a beautiful beach on the south side of the island. Only 20 people showed up, mostly pros who have traveled from all parts of the world and are relaxing before racing again this coming weekend. I'm still pinching myself!

Dave

Coach's Note: Dave fails to mention that he won his age group!