

Xterra Albay Philippines 2015

"I'd rather be lucky than good"

Many of you have read my last race report about the XTERRA World Championships in Maui in October. When Kathy and I were flying home from Maui, I asked Kathy if she wanted to go on "vacation" in the Philippines. Now, if their happened to be a race during the time we were on "vacation" - that would be a coincidence and nothing more...

The Lead In

Training went well, all things considered. There were fits and starts that a typical athlete doesn't have to contend with as we attempted to dial in the dosage of my medication to avoid as many side effects as possible. Overall, my strength and stamina began to return. More importantly, my mind was telling me that my goal to continue my pursuit of off-road triathlon was more than a pipe dream.

Fortunately, my coach was on board, and she was always willing to revise the schedule as my health status changed, and she had endless options for how I could get this thing done.

So, I booked flights to the Philippines and worked on remaining healthy. Having competed (and won my age group) in the Philippines in 2013, the plan was to arrive with enough time to acclimate to the climate and ride the course a bunch of times.

Two weeks before our trip, I was feeling strong and optimistic. We were planning on leaving on Saturday January 24th and staying for 18 days, through February 10th. Of course, everyone in my family and Kathy's was against our going and "strongly encouraging" us to reconsider.

Three days before our scheduled departure, we had to face the possibility that we might have to re-think our plans...for a minute or two. As it turned out, I got released from the hospital 2 days before leaving for the Philippines. Things with my health took yet another unexpected turn.

I couldn't keep anything in me, became severely dehydrated and needed 5 liters of IV fluids and a couple of days in the hospital to get my digestive system working properly. I did not believe Kathy and I would be making the trip until one day before we departed - when I finally felt better. I couldn't wait to get on that plane!

The cycle of battling this tumor has now become a routine. I'll go on the BRAF medication (which is keeping the tumors from growing) and after the 13th to 15th day of being on the medication - the side effects kick in - fevers, vomiting, diarrhea, headaches, mouth sores and joint swelling. Then, it's necessary to cycle off the drugs in order to get the side effects under control. The good news is that we now know generally what to expect and when to expect it to occur.

Arrival in The Philippines

Happily, I was recovered enough on the day of the flight to feel well enough to attempt the 26-hour flight. We flew through Tokyo and arrived in Manila on 1/25. We had a night in Manila then on to

Legazpi the next day. Legazpi is a city of two hundred thousand people located 250 miles south of Manila. The city and region are known for the Mayon Volcano that rises up from the ocean to 7500', it is an active volcano that is truly impressive.

The Xterra course begins on the eastern side of the volcano with a swim in the Pacific, then biking up the volcano through rice fields, jungle, lava beds, rivers, villages etc. and finishes on the western side of the volcano with a run up a huge riverbed of streams, volcanic sand and rice fields.

Kathy and I arrived in Legazpi, stayed for one day and then left for a secluded resort located about 20 miles northeast of Legazpi. Misibis Bay, is a beautiful getaway. We adjusted to the 13-hour time difference and were able to get some swim and run time in at the resort. We returned to Legazpi on Saturday afternoon, put my bike together and got up early Sunday to ride the course.

Pre-Ride

I had no clue where the bike course was (Xterra Philippines had not posted the bike route) so I got up early in search of someone who might be able to point me in the right direction. Leaving the hotel at sunrise, I traveled less than 2 blocks and spied 3 bikers heading in the same direction. One of the guys spoke passable English, the rest spoke Tagalog. My English-speaking new friend has heard of the Xterra race and is able to give me directions to the swim start. Together, we rode about 7 miles north of the city to the swim start, hoping to find a bike trail from the swim finish location.

As we rode over the next ½ hour this is what I saw along the road: a guy walking along the road carrying a pig's head, two kids with bamboo poles on which are hanging their newly-caught bunch of eels that are now for sale, a guy riding a motorcycle with a sidecar full of un-packaged chopped meat, chickens (with leashes in most yards), cows, water buffalo, an ox and little kids that sprint along with the bikes as though it's the Tour de France...and this is all at 6am on a Sunday morning!

I found the beach, rode my bike to the ocean and checked out the water. While standing at what I believed was the swim start, I saw another mt biker enthusiastically waving to me. It turned out, he was a local who will be doing the race next Sunday. Perfect, I think, this guy will know the course and more importantly: some fast lines. We talked for a while; I learned that his name is Eric and his friends are on their way to the beach to also ride the course. By 7am we have 12 Filipinos and one American riding the course, by 8am we are all lost! The first 10k of the 30k course are well laid out and everyone in our group agrees on the route. After about 12k no one knows which trails will make up the race course. No big deal - still a week until the race and I'm just happy to be riding my bike in this amazing place.

The week is going by and I'm doing my workouts, but the bike course is still not marked. On Wednesday the route is posted to the website, but the route is in the jungle. I try to overlay the bike route with Google Earth and there is nothing but trees and lava. I can't make any sense of the bike course. On Thursday (now only three days before the race) I met some friends that I had met in a different part of the Philippines at the race 2 years ago. Perfect, they have a friend who will guide us on the bike course. We ride with him and after 12k's he has to call the race director every time we approach a trail intersection to determine the route. This is NUTS!

On Friday, I get a cab (with my bike) that drops me off at the highest road closest to the bike course (I had the first 12k thoroughly memorized: it was all climbing and I wanted to save my legs.) I was thinking: If I wait at the top of the second long climb, at some point someone will come by that knows the course and I can follow them. I waited almost two hours - no one came down the trail. I threw in the towel and decided to bike back to the hotel and rest until the race.

On my way home I see about 10 mt bikes along a fence, all of the owners are behind a hut where an elderly lady is feeding everyone lunch. I notice one of the riders, Raffy from Manila. I had met him two years ago in Saipan. He tells me to sit, relax and eat some rice. His group is led by the assistant race director - finally someone that knows the entire bike course! A few hours later we are done and I now have a very good feel for the entire course.

Here is where I get lucky:

On Thursday I decided that I should get off the meds until after the race - hoping that I wouldn't experience any side effects on race day. It works, I feel great on Sunday am. The next gift is the weather. It is hot and humid in Legazpi and it rains every day. I watched the weather all week and hoped for rain. On Sunday, I got the next best thing: clouds, big thick beautiful clouds! Clouds are huge for me. I don't have to keep stopping to reapply sunblock and I can take in less fluid on cloudy days.

Race Day

Race morning Kathy and I hire a cab and get to the beach at 5:30, the start is at 7am (another gift), if all goes well I can be done and in the shade by 10:30, before the sun is at its strongest. The next gift falls in my lap: The swim is a triangle, swim out from the shore at a 45' angle to the first buoy then turn right and swim parallel to the shore then another right turn and 45' line back to the shore.

The Swim



I plan to run up the beach 100-150 meters then dive in to cut down the angle to the first buoy. I'm sure every other athlete is thinking the same thing. As the start nears, all of the race marshals are pushing the athletes down the beach and all the athletes are pushing up the beach to get in the best position possible for the start. The gun goes off: everyone sprints left up the beach. At about 20 meters a bunch of pros dive in and start swimming. I keep running, and running, and running. At about 100 meters it's just me and one other guy running and everyone else is in the water.

The other guy is Maurice Mendez. He's 19 years old from Mexico and an amazing athlete. At 150 meters we both dive in and start to swim. Mendez flies by me and I'm now second-guessing this strategy. Then I start breathing on my right side and see that Mendez and I are ahead of the entire field! By the time we hit the first turn buoy, Mendez is in the lead and I'm in the middle of the pros. The next leg is parallel to the beach, then a right turn and back to the shore. I exit the water in under 22 minutes, that's a record for me.

The Bike



The gifts keep coming: The clouds are thick, I had a great swim and I'm finally on my bike! The first 12k are all uphill. The nutrition goes in nicely, and I get my first downhill. Things are starting to flow, this bike course was made for me. The technical sections are a blast, the loose lava sand is slowing my competitors, and I now realize that all the time I spent pre-riding the course is really paying off. I know exactly where I am, what's around the next corner and I'm feeling really confident about the conditions. The only concern are the *water buffalo*; they are everywhere along the course and they are tied to trees with long ropes. If you're flying down the course and spook them, they bolt and if they are on one side of the trail and the tree is on the other side: you get clotheslined. No issues for me, all of the animals are cooperating. I think the pros in front of me have spooked and settled the animals. About 2 miles from T2 the sun comes out. The last mile of the bike is through rice fields, streams and lava rock. I get off the bike, get my running shoes and umbrella.

The Run

(As far as I know no animals were harmed during the race.) The luck keeps coming: the run. The run was a 10K, 5k up and 5k down. But the up was in a river bed about 100' wide and the river bed was loose lava sand and rocks, crisscrossed by streams. Kathy was waiting about 300 meters up the riverbed with a frozen water and sunblock. I grabbed the water and passed on the sunblock...! had my umbrella. The run was painfully slow, the sun was out, it was hot and running up hill in loose sand with wet sneakers made it miserable. But miserable is good! It slowed the competition and made it easier for me to maintain my position in relation to the field. After we hit the top elevation on the run and turned down, things got better. As few clouds shaded me, and the run got a bit more technical. I felt so much better knowing it was flat or downhill all the way to the finish. It was about a mile from the finish and could hear the announcer. A few more rice patties to run between and then I could see the Cagsawa Ruins (a church covered by lava years ago. Only the bell tower is visible, the first floor of the church is now encased in lava).



As far as I know, no animals were hurt during the race!

Daz Parker did have to bunny hop a rope to save her ass on the bike (and keep a water buffalo from being strangled) but that's what she does...she's an Xterra Pro from England who finances her Xterra crack habit by working as a stunt woman Monday- Friday!

As usual another Xterra / another adventure! I was very lucky to complete this race and to qualify for Worlds this early in the season. It really takes the pressure off for the remainder of the year.

Having said that: I can't wait for the next one – Costa Rica on March 29th!!

