

## Race report for Gerardmer, European Long Course Championships 2008 (a chancer's tale)

### **Before the pain...**

It was March 2007, I had just finished the Belvoir Half Marathon with a PB of 1:53:45 and feeling very sore but very pleased with myself and confident that I could finally crack my running.....after a celebratory curry (it was Julie's birthday [yes I am blaming you!]) and several intoxicating cups of tea at Lee's house afterwards a bunch of us all got carried away and signed up for Gerardmer without checking the course after being told by Lee (yes I am blaming you!) it was a ¾ Ironman (IM) and would be good prep for the full IM in 2009 as it is a large jump otherwise.

In October 2007 after a conversation with Kat (yes I am blaming you too!) I decided to email BTF and put myself forward for the long distance championships, after all I had nothing to lose as I was already entered for the same race and although my running had not improved as I had hoped I was confident I had now solved the issue with my shins and I could make significant progress over the winter.

Time went by and I was enjoying my race season, I had made some progress on my run and was looking forward to Weymouth HIM as I had actually done the training this time unlike the Vitruvian last year. As it turned out I had a good swim, an ok bike and in the end the heat and lack of aid stations got to me on the run and I ended up with a disappointing time which almost exactly equalled my Vitruvian 2007 time. Things got better with an in depth discussion about the Gerardmer course, suddenly realising that the swim is 4k, longer than an Ironman swim and the bike course is in the mountains, in fact the Tour de France has been over some of them. I was starting to regret signing up!

Time to regroup, resuming training after this was a little hard and inconsistent for a while but eventually got back into the swing of things. I had a good Dambuster despite being tired from Weymouth, knocking more than 10 minutes of my time. I kept up the long bike rides at the weekends with no problem but I was slacking on the long runs, still I was running more often and that was something... David was injured and almost completely wrecked after Weymouth and the 18 mile run was really playing on his mind.

About 6 weeks before the race I received an email from BTF, I was in....b\*#@\$#\*s. Too late now to do any meaningful panic training. It gets worse with the realisation that I need to wear age group kit to really highlight my ineptitude and I would also get a separate wave time with the Pro's and other age group athletes from the open wave athletes who are doing it just for fun. Fortunately Sadie rang me soon after this and kicked me up the arse; suddenly we were doing a long run around Rutland water (17 miles) in 3 weeks time. Plenty of time to get my running up to speed..., actually who am I kidding I had no time to get my distance up in preparation for that! Suddenly my long runs of 6 miles seemed woefully inadequate in preparation for this and I decided on little and more often in the lead up to the long run (an idea I stole from Brian).

Before I knew it, it was the appointed hour and feeling very much like a condemned woman I turned up to the meeting point on the South Shore after all day wishing that Sadie would phone and cancel – she didn't. It was time, I couldn't put it off any longer and it was unbelievably hot but I took my water belt and some money and off we set. The first 6 miles were the hardest, mainly because of the heat but also because after this point you would be in no-mans land and at the point of no return – or if you did return it would be almost as far. We shuffled for a long time, popping into the pub to buy soda and lime and to top up the water bottle, consuming unpalatable gels all the while gossiping, putting the world to rights and with Sadie encouraging me all the way. I got to the point where I was sure that there was no more than 2 miles to go and knew that I could definitely make it, I wasn't as tired as I was expecting. Before I knew it we arrived back at the car park – we had done it and Sadie laughed at my relieved/overjoyed expression. A quick dip in the lake for the legs and some recovery drinks later and Sadie confides in me that her

longest run recently has also been about 5 miles – I feel humbled and a bit selfish, I had been so wrapped up in my own training to ask.

We agree to do another long run (15 miles) in 2 weeks time. This time we meet at Sadie's shop and some others from the club join us. Sadie has planned a circular route and secreted drinks at "aid stations" fortuitously the weather is perfect. The group was quite mixed ability and pretty soon it split, we agreed that the faster runners will turn back to make sure that we don't lose anyone. We lost someone despite our plan and along with a mix up in the communications we were only able to retrieve said person after the finish point when we were re-united with our cars. In the meantime poor David turned back at his planned 5 mile point and got back to the car a good hour before anyone else only the car was locked up so he was almost blue when we all returned.

A few weeks after this and Sadie was into her taper now as her event was a week earlier than mine. David and I decided to join Andy and Jeanette for a 12 mile run. Sam and Liam were also there and then we realised we were in trouble. So this nice gentle run started off at 7:30 minute miles, there was no way I could keep this up for 12 miles but at least I was in familiar countryside. This time we would be the tail-enders and this time the heat was deceptive and resulted in David stripping off and secreting one of his tops in the hedgerow despite it being overcast. With the run nearly over there is a vicious hill back to our start point which had most of us walking. Tea and cake back at the Fosters and the pain was forgotten, in fact, I felt like I could have run some more, but only at my pace....someday to spend the August bank holiday Monday.

Over the remaining 2 weeks I dropped the running down to 6 and then 3 miles leading up to the race and only dropping the long rides and the long swims the week before. At 3:00am on the Thursday before the race we were loading our kit into Freddie's van and after a couple of stops to load more people and kit we were on our way to the Chunnel terminal. Once trapped in Freddie's we discovered that the only CD in the car is Dire Straits, twelve hours later we are at our destination and very keen to get out of the van for a considerable period of time. We arrive late afternoon and check our accommodation out, the expo and get some food, drink quite a bit of red wine and go to bed.

The following day is taken up with registration, briefing, photos, checking the kit over, going for a confidence destroying spin (oh my god those mountains are big!) and then final check and put the kit into the transition area. The weather has been great today, not too warm but the sun was out – very nice. Back to the hotel for some sobering thoughts some more food and wine and a reasonably early night although no-one is anticipating getting much sleep.

The following morning I am strangely calm, perhaps it is because David is clearly not and one of us has to be. It is grey outside and the rain is so heavy at times that I can barely see the end of the road let alone the end of the lake. There are some last minute adjustments to the kit for the weather and some people are wheeling their bikes out of transition and are packing them away, sensibly deciding not to race. I ponder for a moment that I should have tied the top of my kit bags properly as the rain is likely to be making everything wet but I don't have any time to sort this out and besides they have been out all night anyway. David is flapping, so much so that I need to shoot off for my start whilst he runs back to our room for something. His wave starts 10 minutes later which is not enough time for me not to get swum over by the faster open wave athletes.

## **During**

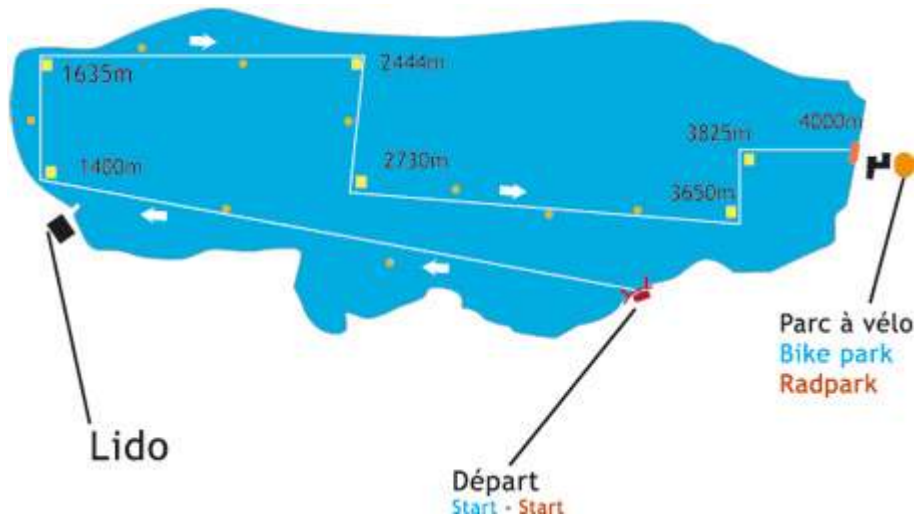
So I am a bit tight for time as I jog to the swim start in my wetsuit, I have lost track of Julie who is also in my wave but she has no arms in her wetsuit so should be easy to spot. I follow another couple of rubber clad athletes who are also running to the start; my feet are taking a bit of a battering as there are sharp stones on the ground. Just as I get there I spot Julie standing nervously at the back of the pack. I decide to join her there being keen to avoid any tussling at the front with the Pro's and faster Age Groupers.

I am aware that the start is imminent and I put my goggles on in readiness, there is something wrong though, the left hand side is not sticking to my face. After several attempts to increase the suction by punching myself in the eye socket I resort to taking them off to have a proper look. Damn it, the seal is sticking out of the lens cover (from when I took them apart and cleaned them) I have to disassemble them and reassemble them quickly. I am all fingers and thumbs at this point as I am sure the air horn is going to sound at any moment signalling the start and I drop the 3 separate parts on the floor. I can't do it the first time as I still have the bulge in the seal, or the second, or the third, I am really panicking now. Fourth time lucky and with just enough time to get them stuck on my face the air horn goes. I exchange apprehensive glances with Julie as we wade into the water wishing each other a good race and realise that this episode had stressed Julie almost as much as it has me.

The athletes quickly spread out in the water and pretty soon I am fully submerged and swimming. The water is lovely and clear, not cold which is a relief as normally I would get in for a bit for a warm up first as it can really affect your breathing if it is cold. I settle in and start chiding myself for the goggle misdemeanour and not getting a warm up resolving never to do that again. After a while I forget about that and start to think constantly about where the next buoy is, what the weather is doing and what kit am I going to wear, can I follow some feet, how many people can I overtake, when are first people from the open wave going to be swimming over me, should I try and drink some of the lake to avoid dehydration and risk tummy problems.....

It wasn't planned but I took a couple of mouthfuls of water when I got my breathing wrong, it wasn't so bad but time would tell if this would affect me later on. After a while I find a swimmer who is about the same pace as me and as he is ahead I follow him, keeping an eye on his feet under the water. Fortunately I do occasionally look for myself as well, I realise he is heading for the wrong buoy, I correct my course but he carries on and he is too far away to tug at his feet so that I can let him know. The rain stops for a bit at this point and I think through some last minute changes to my wardrobe and start to look forward to the bike, I over rotate in order to glance at the sky, it's all grey with the world's tiniest patch of blue. The rain starts again soon after this and I revert back to my original plan trying to work out why I didn't bring my winter jacket ☹

I am still catching people at this point as their arms are getting tired and I take a while to warm up. I chuckle to myself when I reach the first buoy as some poor person has been installed into it; the rain is still lashing down. I reach the second buoy and then the third and I am feeling pleased that no blue hats have passed me yet and try to picture the swim route in my head so that I know which side of the remaining buoys I have to swim on. Then I lose track of exactly where I am on the course, oh well, can't be that far now. Just as I am approaching the next buoy there is a line of blue hats taking full advantage of the drafting benefit but they are way to fast for me to tag on the back. These guys must be well clear of the pack by now but it is only a matter of time before I get caught in the front of the main field. I get to another buoy before any more blue hats appear and then there is a fairly steady stream to the next buoy but then they stop. I make it to the end of the 4K/2.5 mile course in 1:21:22 without being caught by the main field – result ☺.

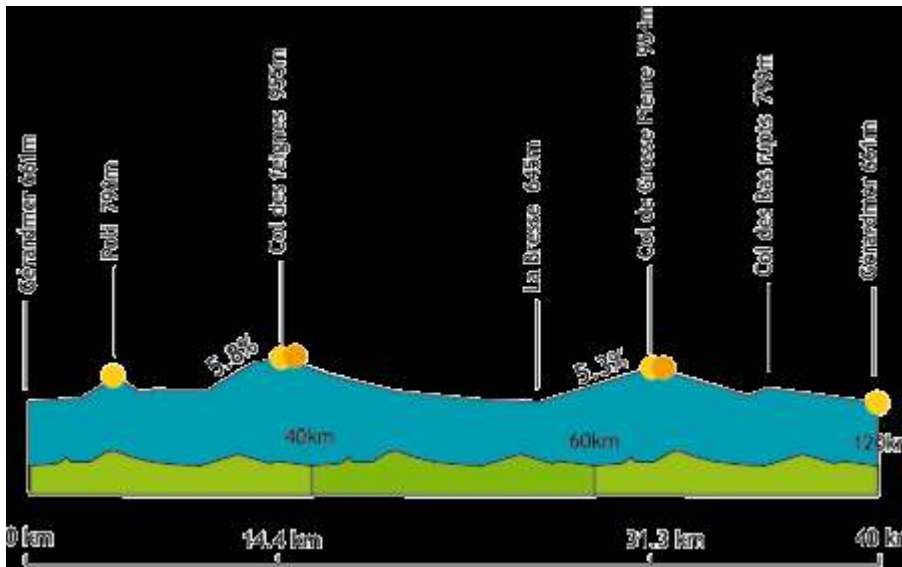


It's still raining heavily and as I exit the water I am handed a cup which is a third full with some dark liquid, I have no idea what it is but decide to drink it anyway. I was expecting flat coke but it turned out to be warm black tea – yum, this had a positive effect on my mental preparations for the bike. I grab my bag, which fortunately someone has tied up properly (thank you marshals) and run into the ladies changing tent passing some pert naked butts in the male changing tents – result ☺. I strip off my wetsuit, get all my stuff out of the bag and wrap up with everything I have for the bike all with no help from the marshals who are supposedly there to assist as they are busy gossiping with each other. Whilst I am putting the finishing touches to my outfit a man runs into the tent still wearing his wetsuit, sits down next to me and proceeds to throw up. I rapidly retrieve my wetsuit which is still on the floor and stuff it back into the bag and forcefully handing it to one of the marshals who has not immediately run to his aid with a glare, 6:57 for T1.

I get to my bike and the cover has been removed, great, but my helmet was hanging upside down, not so great. I put it on and squeeze it onto my head and the water runs down my face from the lining, fantastic. I run to the mount point with my bike and take my time getting onto it and hear for the first time some of the mates that I arrived with cheering me on (if I was them I would have still been in bed). I soon forgot about the chundering man and set off with a smile on my face despite the rain.

I had decided that hill climbing was not my forte so I planned to take it steady up and then see how fast I could go down the other side. The first lap was all new and a bit quiet so I was taking it all in and concentrating on drinking and eating as much as I could. On the second lap and being cheered by passing my mates again I felt good, I was still eating and drinking but now I was finding that there were more people on the route and was really enjoying the camaraderie amongst the competitors. Shouts of “Allez Rebecca”, “Allez Les Filles” and “Courage” were becoming familiar and not just from the marshals but supporters and other competitors – what a great idea printing your name on the race numbers. At the end of the second lap on the last and longest mountain 2 of my mates from the open wave had caught me but still no sign of David. At this point in a race you start analysing and I had worked out that one of the lads must have come out of the swim before me and would be way ahead on the bike. I stayed with them for a bit for a chat before they started to pull away from me and then I was on the third lap, the first climb was OK and even the second although I was glad to be climbing this for the last time. It was the descent that got me, by this time I had gained enough confidence to push down the other side and it was easy to follow the lines of the rider in front (listening out for crash noises) as the wheels were clearly marking the wet road surface. After 3x11k downhill the rain had chilled me to the bone; my hands were so cold I could not change gear easily or brake for long periods which made the 2 final descents interesting.

I was at a low point and I was whimpering a bit “keep going, there’ll be a climb soon and you’ll warm up” was all I kept repeating to myself. About halfway up the last mountain David caught me, we had a chat and I confided in him that I was so cold and my lower back was really hurting that I was thinking about pulling out, even the climb was not warming me up. I asked him if he was going to continue and he confirmed he was going to set off on the run and see how he felt. After he left I thought to myself “get a grip, if David is even contemplating running with his history of injuries and lack of training I should at least do a lap”. I gave myself a mental kick up the arse and concentrated on just getting back and if nothing else getting changed into some dry (running) clothes. It was with great relief that I reached the final descent and racked my bike in transition 120K/75 miles done in 5:37:16 ☹️ was hoping for closer to 5 hours but this does include lots of faff in T2. Reminder to self to sell all my bikes on ebay when I get back.



Once off the bike the extent of the lower back pain became apparent and I couldn't run at all and I walked into the changing tent. After a bit of confusion with the bag I eventually got myself sorted out and it was nice to be in dry kit but I had to put my wet gillet back on to keep the rain out as it was still persistently precipitating. The run was 4 laps of the lake so I knew I would never be too far away from home if I decided to give up. I set off and the short rest whilst getting changed had resolved the back pain and within a few miles I was warm, it was great and at this point I knew I would finish. It wasn't long before I caught sight of another mate from the club who was walking by this stage; I never caught him though as he when he started running he was still faster than me but somehow seeing him “struggle” made me feel better.

I was starting to really enjoy the run or maybe I was just grateful to get off the bike. I did as I had planned and walked through every aid station taking on food and drink at every one. I was hoping to catch David but I didn't see him, I found out on the second lap that I got out of T2 ahead of him. I chatted to a couple of competitors; one man I ran with for a while had done Zurich Ironman earlier in the year. This was a race I was planning to do next year and I knew someone who had done this race earlier in the year. By his reckoning it was only 15% harder than this race and the mountains were nowhere near as severe. This was a great incentive and as I powered away from him on the third lap I was still feeling strong. The support from the aid stations was fantastic with all the helpers cheering you on and calling out your name. By the end of the third lap I was having another mental battle, the aid station walk was becoming longer but I had Sadie's advice in my head “keep shuffling and you'll be surprised how many people you'll over take”. I resolved if I needed to walk outside of the aid stations it would only be on the last lap, in the end I reduced this to just the 2 hills on the last lap and actually managed to keep shuffling

through both of them. Near the end I was running with another lady, she was slower than me but I was taking more time at the aid stations, on the penultimate aid station she was about 250 yards ahead of me and there was only a few miles left, I tried to work out if she was in my age group – she might be. I was relaxed though as I knew there was a downhill section coming up and I could pull away from her as I had done on previous laps – but what if she had something in reserve? This was it, the start of the downhill and the last 2 miles, better than that David had not come past me at this point. I opened up my legs and went flying past her and when the ground levelled out I kept the same pace although it was hurting now.

I approached the aid station but my paranoia would not let me stop; besides it wasn't that far to the finish line now. Well the finish line was starting to feel a long way now but I kept pushing aware that I could stop soon, one last killer bump up to the finishing shoot and I was running along the matting and working out when exactly I could stop running and start walking. I saw a timing mat but wasn't sure if the official finish was here or at the finishing gantry which had the clock on it, it was only 15m or so but at this stage that felt like a lot. I kept shuffling up to the gantry and there was a ramp at the top of which I was sure I had finished which is just as well as this final effort brought me to a complete standstill at the top – I forgot about the photo opportunity presumably why there was a ramp at this point – Doh, forgot to smile! I had completed the run and got changed in T2 in 3:15:24 which was faster than the lead boy from our club and in total my time was 10:21:01 about an hour down on the boys 😊

### **After**

Then there was the wait for David to come through; it was a very tense 10 minutes until I knew that I had beaten him but after a few more minutes I started to worry where he was. Every time I thought about him crossing the line it brought tears to my eyes, I knew how much this event had preyed on his mind and how bad his run preparation was, in fact writing this I am still getting watery eyes – must be dusty in here. Another twelve minutes later and I was really cold and relieved to see David trotting up the finishing shoot and smiling. By this time I had already stiffened up quite well and we snuck off for a shower and a change of clothes before returning to cheer Julie in. About an hour after I finished I feel really sick and I was relieved to hear that some others have actually been sick – must be normal.

Eventually we get ourselves sorted and return to the race to cheer in Julie. She comes through like I had no doubt she would and even has enough energy for a cartwheel on the finish line – fantastic! There are a lot of hugs, kisses, tears, shaking of hands and shivers and every one goes back to the hotels to get warmed up. We all meet up for something to eat later but despite thinking I could eat a horse when my food turns up I barely eat a quarter of it. I am still feeling a bit cold and am now very achy – everything hurts.

That night I cannot sleep, it's not the endorphins, it's the pain. I cannot get comfortable, in the end I have to get extra pillows to place under my knees. At least now I am warm, too warm – I have to open a window. I am drinking a fair bit but my appetite is still severely depressed considering that I have burnt in the region of 10,000 calories. Even at breakfast the next morning it has not returned and I was to discover later on that it would not return to its former glory until at least a week afterwards. Everything to do with my digestive system was different – I won't go into details but it surprised me how different this was to doing a standard Half Ironman distance triathlon. Because of the length of the swim and the severity of the bike course this race was not that dissimilar to a full Ironman event and I was now discovering what this meant for my recovery and it was a bit of a shock.

It's now 2 weeks on and I have lost a lot of weight, still not eating at my former levels although it is improved from last week. I am sore after every run I have done despite having 10 days rest (no running, one 25 mile cycle and 2 swims) afterwards. I am still tired although not as tired as last week. I am fighting symptoms of being rundown and really looking forward to the off season and just chilling out. It has been a tough year and the race was a very tough day at the office.

Still I haven't sold my bikes so when I have got myself back together properly (have read it could take 6 weeks) I will be back out with the road club on the Sunday rides although probably not before then so hopefully see some of you before Christmas 😊.

### **Lessons learnt**

Don't sign up or agree to do anything until you have fully thought them through and maybe not even then!

Your mates will get you through it – thanks to all of you but especially David, Sadie, Julie, Daley, Lee, Sue, Freddie, Jeanette and Kat for making me do the training/ encouraging me/sorting me out ;- ) and to Brian for fixing me and David and getting us through it 😊

### **Glossary**

T1 = first transition from swim to bike

T2 = second transition from bike to run

Triathlete = idiot

Ironman event = only for the criminally insane