

Half Ironman Pucon, Chile
By Joe Zemaite

Note from before the race....

It's summer time in the Southern hemisphere and I'm in Pucon, Chile to race at the 20th running of the Half Ironman Pucon. Pucon is a small resort town about 350 miles south of Santiago.

The trip was a long one: I flew from Phoenix to Atlanta to Santiago to Temuco and then it was a 90 minute drive to Pucon. Pucon is nestled at the base of the Villarica Volcano, a snow covered active volcano, from which a small stream of grey smoke is constantly rising, and Lake Villarica. The town is small, about 15,000 people live here, but quite crowded as it is the height of tourist season.

It's been a tough last couple weeks of training in Phoenix. I had a lingering severe cold which made it difficult to get in the training I needed. Regardless, I feel pretty good right now and I'm confident that I will have a good race. Pucon is one of the few top races in South America and gives me a whole new field to race against. Some of the names in the pro field are familiar, but many of them are from Chile and Argentina who don't race much outside of South America.

The swim is two laps of a course set up in Lake Villarica. Though the air is warm, the water is quite cold since the snow from the mountains runs into the lake. The lake is very clear and should be an excellent swim venue for the race.

The bike course is also two laps, totalling 56 miles. We have a good view of the volcano the whole way. There is really only one section of hills per lap, but when we rode the course today the wind really picked up.

The run course is three laps and features killer hills. It really wouldn't be so bad except we have to go through the section three times.

The race is on Sunday, January 22nd and it starts at 9AM local time, which is two hours earlier than EST.

Note from after the race....

What a tough race! I was expecting a major challenge since my training had been nearly non existent after being sick 2 of the last 3 weeks, but this race was something else.

The swim was two laps in Lake Villarica with a painful 150 meter run on the rough black sand beach between the laps. I was introduced to the crowd as "numero catorce". The 500 competitors thinned out quickly and it was nice to have people ahead of me to follow since the visibility in the lake was poor in the morning. After the swim we had an uphill run off the beach and into the transition area.

The bike was also a two lap course. The first half mile or so was in town with thousands of people lining the road. Once we exited town the stark beauty of Southern Chile was surrounding us with the Volcano dominating the landscape to the right and alternating dense forests and farmland on the left. The first leg of the race was mostly uphill, with a few flat or downhill sections to give us a break from the climbing. I flew back to down on the second leg of the first lap with an awesome tailwind that helped all the athletes make up time. The second lap was much more of a challenge; it was hard to shift back into "uphill mode" on the way out. The hills seemed longer and steeper. The worst part of the day was making the turn expecting a tail wind and having a brutal headwind instead. On sections of the road where I was cruising over 30 MPH on the first lap I was struggling to hold 17 MPH on the second lap. It was a grind all the way back to the transition area.

The run had two very distinct segments to each of its three laps. The first 4 KM of each lap was some of the steepest hills I have even seen on a triathlon course. The first time was not so bad, but by the third lap I was much more challenging. After each hill segment we had about 3KM in town, perfectly flat with thousands of people yelling for us in Spanish. I held on pretty well through the second lap and faded on the third.

Although final results are not posted yet, the preliminary results show me in 20th place in the professional category. There were 31 entrants. It was not the result I was hoping for when I scheduled the trip, but with the realities of the last three weeks I was pretty happy with the result.

I can see why this race has been called by Inside Triathlon "The Most Beautiful Race in the World" everywhere we turned there was something cool to look at. This was the first race I have ever been to where English was not spoken at all. With all of my other races English was the language spoken since it is the official language of the ITU and the WTC, the two international governing bodies of the sport.

Chile was the 11th country and South American was the 5th continent I have raced in. I am hoping to go to South Africa for Ironman South Africa in March. I will have to see how my training goes in the next four weeks to determine if I can get myself ready for a great full Ironman event in that time. Meanwhile, I'm climbing the snow capped Volcano tomorrow and going on a rafting trip on Tuesday. Hopefully some fun in the next couple days will make up for the suffering today!

Until the next time,
Joe Zemaitis