

Rio Salado Age Group Triathlon: Hunting Urmas Grossthal by Mark Mattern

Things at the start of the day seemed pretty normal, early to the transition area I was able to get my choice of spots on the bike racks and there was plenty of time to get settled in. Then I walked Urmas, the Estonian triathlete I only know too well, all decked out in the red team clothing of the Phoenix Triathlon Club. "Urmas," I shouted, "I've saved you one of the best spots in the transition area right next to me . . . where I can keep my eye on you." Urmas is arguably one of the most talented age group athletes in Arizona when he's training and at his best. Like a fish in the water, the swim is his strongest of the three events, but don't count him out on the other stages of the race. In the recent past he's taken such honors as 3rd overall amateur at Escape From Alcatraz; however, I knew that this year he's not had the time to devote to training and racing like in those past years. Therefore, I thought, today could be my chance!

After a brief warm-up with Matt Gurtatowski (hoping to set his PR in the Olympic distance by breaking 2:50) and zipping Urmas into his wetsuit it was off to the beach. The swim felt nice as I stayed relaxed. It was pretty easy to sight on this course with not only the buoys to follow, but also the shoreline and the bridges to use as guides. I knew that I'd be giving up some time in the water, but to my surprise I set my PR for the 1500m distance in 19:26 (I'm guessing the course was short - maybe 1350m or so). Coming up the stairs to the transition I found Steve Dannenbaum who had started in a previous wave struggling with his wet suit. Coming from the sport of Roller Blading, swimming is not Steve's best event. "Go get 'em buddy," he shouted as I came by.

In the transition, just as I'd expected, Urmas' bike was already gone . . . with him on it. Never worry though, I've been feeling pretty strong on the bike lately - especially since Kevin at Bicycle Showcase fit me on my new Argon 18 TT bike! So I set off to give it my all on the 4 loop, flat bike course (the flat courses suit me well - at 180 lbs the hills aren't always my friend). I quickly began catching some of the faster swimmers as well as some PTC members who'd started in different waves. Every time I saw some red clothing I'd set my sights on reeling them in . . . but no Urmas. There was Terry Smallin - training for IM USA - who shouted "Markyyyyy" as I went past, Then another club member . . . "who is that - ahhh, Karim Eldib." "There's Mark Berry - strong swimmer, decent on the bike." Then, "What's that

up ahead? He's in team clothing and moving pretty well. It could be . . . Maybe . . . Except he's not quite as skinny as Urmas . . . What!!! Brian Kochert!!! How did he get in front of me??? Oh my, I hope I just lapped him!!!"

Well, "That was it." The 'Great Grossthal' had held me off on the bike I figured as I rounded the last turn and headed back to the transition area. "Just work on the best race you can" I told myself. "But wait, what's that? There's Urmas' bike and the front wheel is still spinning!" "Oh yeah," said a voice from the crowd "he just left. He's probably about 30 seconds ahead of you."

On Tuesday nights at the club Track Workouts, Urmas and I (along with Ivan Puchades) pretty much run stride for stride on most of the intervals. Although Ivan may pull away a little bit on us every now and then, when we get to the finish if I'm not behind/beside Urmas then he's just off my shoulder. "This could prove interesting now as we're starting the run so close to one another," I thought. Then, as I began the climb up to Curry I caught my first glimpse of the elusive Estonian just ahead. "Game on!"

Now one thing you should know about me is that I have a tendency to push a little too hard a little too early on the run occasionally. "Not this time though," I thought as I crept closer to the unaware prey only 10 seconds ahead now as we neared the 1 mile mark. "I'll catch up to him and then settle just behind and wait for the right moment." Then, coming through the first aid station Desmond Barnes caught my eye. "Go Mark!" he shouted with a booming voice. "Shhh," I thought "you'll blow my cover." But the blonde stud ahead didn't seem to notice.

Shortly thereafter, I was on the heels of what I'd been hunting all day long. What a rush! A feeling of Euphoria filled my senses and my legs seemed to lighten up and nearly spring off the concrete. Ignoring all sense I decided "I'm going for it!" Big Mistake. As I came through the aid station on the start of our trek across the Mill Avenue Bridge Cliff and Tatjana Eggink greeted me warmly and then relayed, "Urmas is right behind you!" "Yeah, I know," I thought as I tried to put some distance between us.

As we neared the 3 mile point on the run I noticed Grossthal about 15-20 seconds back, "but wait a minute . . . my legs are feeling a little heavy. I'd better pace myself and hold on for the next 3 miles." At this point we were running out and back on a gravel access road south of Tempe Town Lake between Rural and McClintock Roads. There was

a trickle of athletes returning from the turn around and looking strong. "I don't think I look so good." Then at the turn around, "Uh oh, he's within about 8 seconds. Just keep going, he's got to be feeling it also."

Just before the Rural bridge, with only 1.2 miles to go I heard something: "Who's foot steps is that? Urmas is that you buddy?" No word. Only the solid, steady rythm of his run as the Estonian passed by. I knew that I was toast and had blown up. Lacking the internal mechanism to ignore the pain I let him go by and proceeded to crawl to the finish. Adam Weber now just ahead greeted me as I lumbered by saying "Come on Mark, you're faster than that!" In that last mile of the run I lost 1:23 to Urmas who claimed 1st in our age group and 5th overall.

Hanging out at the finish line - ok, stuffing my face with the free post race meal - I was able to catch up with everyone (my favorite part of the day!). It seems that Matt Gurtatowski smashed his previous PR finishing in 2:32 and was very happy. Brian Kochert, it turns out, was racing in the clydesdale division and started in a different wave than I did. When I told him of my shock that he was in front of me on the bike, he said "Yeah, I really enjoyed seeing the surprise on your face when you realized that was me!" One of our young studs in the club, Griff Skjelstad, was injured so did the race as a relay. He posted the fastest bike split of the day in 56:39. Another top finish of the day was Nicole Lindstrom. After winning the Dannon Triathlon one week before, she showed up in Tempe to take 2nd overall. I didn't find Mark Berry or Terry Smallin at the finish line, but I did find Kathy Becque at the awards banquet - she didn't do the race but was happy to help drink the beer!

Later at the awards ceremony (just before the picture taken above), Urmas queried "You must be dissapointed you didn't beat me today?" "No," I replied, "I'm happy with my race overall. I had fun racing with you today, and it would never be a disappointment to be beaten by you - a good friend." "Well, he said "maybe you'll get me in Show Low."