

FROM  
MOROCCO  
TO  
MONACO  
THE ULTIMATE TRIATHLON

Christian Newbold chats to former professional soccer player Luke Tyburski in part two of the series that looks at his journey from the football field to an ultra-triathlon crossing Morocco and Monaco.

Words: Christian Newbold



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**L**uke Tyburski had already subjected himself to some testing tasks. He had torn off his former professional soccer player skin to uncover a vague yearning to become a self-proclaimed adventurer. So, he quite randomly selected a passage that passed over land and sea and decided to traverse it under his own steam. The path spanned 2000 kilometres; beginning in Morocco, he would swim the Strait of Gibraltar, cycle the length of the Spanish coastline to the border of France, and run to the principality of Monaco, finishing in Monte Carlo – a Morocco to Monaco ultra-triathlon. The only problem was he had never trained for anything even remotely close to such an undertaking.

To find out what this meant, he first strip-searched his soul in the Moroccan Sahara, running the seven-day, 250-kilometre footrace known as the Marathon des Sables. He then rode over 400 kilometres in a single day to learn how to surf. He once awoke at 5am just below Everest base camp with 55 kilometres to run to safety after narrowly avoiding death from altitude

sickness at more than five kilometres above sea level. Then he planted himself in the middle of a super-typhoon-ravaged island in the South China Sea, with little more than the clothes on his back and a hammock, just so he could run the 90 kilometres back out again.

He quite deliberately subjected himself to a demonstrated lexicon of ultra-distance pleasantries all in the name of training for something that, to him, was an unknown quantity. But he did do one triathlon before embarking on his own ultimate triathlon – the Double Brutal Triathlon in the Snowdonia National Park in Wales, UK. Double, because it was a double iron-distance triathlon, and brutal because the terrain through which it ran was just that! It took him a non-stop 35 hours – perfect!

With the Double Brutal in the bag, he had one year to train for his Morocco to Monaco Ultimate Triathlon. He began with a period of rest during which time he thought more specifically about what his event would entail. He allowed himself 12 days to complete the 2000-kilometre odyssey, with a basic break down that looked like this:

the swim and the first cycle leg on day one, four back-to-back days of cycling to cover 1300 hot, hilly and windy kilometres, then seven days of running almost a double marathon each day.

Specific training involved a lot of big, back-to-back rides and runs with as much swimming as he could fit in. To fortify this training he attended a swim camp in Malta to get some good miles into his arms, raced in a number of ultramarathons, and upped his cycling that was to include a three-day, 600-kilometre mini-tour in France with a friend in the June before the triathlon.

But it wouldn't be as easy as simply covering the distances, especially after a communication mishap on the bike in France. When his companion's GPS said to go left, which he did, Luke was taken by surprise and, in taking evasive action, went over the handlebars and landed with enough force to fracture and tear cartilage in his hip, resulting in a 10-week lay-off from both riding and running.

Like all setbacks in his life, he refused to dwell on the obvious disappointment to his training. Instead, he simply asked himself what it was he needed to do to overcome the interruption. He approached this with utter diligence in his rehabilitation (i.e. do basically nothing, and we all know exactly how hard that can be!). What he could do was swim using a pull buoy and work on whatever core-strengthening exercises he could get away with. The silver lining could be found in taking care of the logistics presented by the enormity of his challenge. The time that opened up without the hours of cycling and running were taken up with the necessary promotions needed to both raise funds and awareness for The Ultimate Triathlon. And he just hoped he would still have enough time when (and there was still a question of 'if') he healed to prepare.

With the enforced rest period behind him, he had four

months left to prepare. He picked up where he left off, completing all of his training by himself and topped the hard work off with a six-day super-special training week where he completed 50 hours of training. He loaded his legs with three 200-kilometre rides with two ocean swims, and three 60-kilometre runs with a solid pool session.

With his newly earned degree (with honours) from the University of Self-Imposed Consolidated Knocks (U-SICK), he was ready to take on his greatest challenge. It was to be the culmination of five years of transformation, from soccer hopeful to adventure athlete extraordinaire. He faced the Strait of Gibraltar awaiting the all-clear to begin.

But before he could even get wet he would have to delve into his playbook of contingencies. Where he was led to believe the route would have him leaving the north coast of Morocco bound for the southern tip of Spain some 20 to 22 kilometres away, the prevailing currents would have it otherwise. To proceed in this direction would more realistically mean a 30 to 35 kilometre swim against the seething mass of the waters' predisposition – a task he simply had not prepared for. Once again, he would have to put emotions aside, get realistic, and just do what had to be done.

So, from a tiny island outcrop on the Costa de la Luz in Tarifa, Spain, where the Mediterranean Sea meets the Atlantic Ocean, Luke Tyburski took a deep breath and began his swim from Europe to Africa.

His support crew consisted of the husband and wife owners of his nutrition sponsor 33Shake, the one-man film crew who was there to film his endeavour, and his osteopathy student/massage therapist girlfriend.

He swam for five hours, 11 minutes to complete the first leg of The Ultimate Triathlon. He encountered some vicious currents that required some concerted efforts to overcome, dodged the many hundreds of vessels that frequent one

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of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, and covered 25 kilometres before kissing the rocks of Morocco and eating some seaweed. He then boarded the boat that would both deliver him back to Spain and serve as a mobile transition area so he could change for the 100-kilometre cycle leg that would complete the first day. It was a disturbed three-hour sleep that opened the way for the second day. A long ride of some 360 kilometres lay ahead for Tyburski, which he completed at 1am the following morning. But the beauty of Spain's Costa del Sol, travelling through Marbella to Málaga, riding past white sandy beaches and over coastal cliffs, in and out of sun-drenched bays and finishing in Carboneras made up for the very long journey.

The 460 kilometres he had already ridden was added to during day three, as he racked-up a further 303 kilometres. The land this time was quite different. "That day was pretty cool, and actually went inland a bit and was like a bit of a desert oasis," said Tyburski, describing his ability to dissociate from the fatigue that was already starting to set in. "It took me a good 70 kilometres to wake up." But his dissociative abilities reached new heights, and surprised even himself.

"I don't actually remember the last 60 kilometres. Basically, I had passed out on the bike, and my crew eventually found me hunched over the handlebars, veering erratically to and from either side of the road. It was about midnight and after yelling

at me, they grabbed me and carried me to the back of the van. I was out cold."

The next thing he knew he woke in a bed with no memory of the final two or three hours of the day three cycle leg, or how he got to the hotel room let alone actually getting into bed. "I woke up with a pounding headache and still in my cycling kit, feeling like I'd been hit by a bus."

But he had travelled the distance nonetheless – proof of this lay with his tracking device and some footage of him forging on in a delirious state. Memory loss and exhaustion were still present as he insisted on beginning the next day, which he did at around 9:30. But after only two out-of-control kilometres on the bike, the support crew enforced a rest day. The 48 hours' worth of exercise over three days on the back of only six hours' sleep certainly warranted their decision. Tyburski ate and slept in preparation for the next onslaught.

The following day (day four on the road and day five in total) saw him complete a relatively flat 335 kilometres through Alicante, up through Valencia and along the coast. During this day, he gained some insight into what he had put his crew through during the previous cycling leg. "My focus for that day was; OK, my crew have worked so hard for me, so I'm going to work hard for them." He upped the tempo a little to get the day done so they could all have a little more rest before the final day on the bike.

The 25-kilometre swim and the over 1100 kilometres he had already cycled were beginning to exact more of a physical toll as a small and tightening hamstring tear was changing his biomechanics and causing some discomfort. "I felt like I was cycling with one leg for a while," he said, "that, and the fact I had a really sore butt, I was pretty glad to be nearing the end of the cycling."

After just over 200 kilometres, he went through Girona and reached France and the end of the planned cycling leg of The Ultimate Triathlon. The catch was that he still wanted to complete his goal in the 12 days he had allowed himself from the outset. That meant that the 80 kilometres per day over seven days had just turned into nearly 100 kilometres a day in six! "That was my dream, and the goal was Morocco to Monaco, 2000 kilometres in 12 days."

During the first day of running he felt pretty good. Running was his strongest leg, and the different loading on his hamstring felt good. "At about 75 kilometres, though, I started to get tired and it was dark... and then the next thing I remember I woke up in a hotel room the next day." He had fallen face-first into the grass after 85 kilometres, had once again been scooped up by his crew and put to bed... again.


By 7am, everyone became a little concerned at his uncanny ability to recover. As fresh as a daisy, he set off with every intention of covering the 100 kilometres he had planned. "But at about 20 kilometres into that next day, I felt my quad start to strain and tear. I've had enough injuries to know what a muscle tear feels like, and after about 25 kilometres, my body started to shut down again."

The running slowed down to a shuffle, the shuffle to a stagger, and before he could collapse, his wizened support crew this time caught him and gently laid him in the back of the van after 35 kilometres of running. It was back to bed for Luke Tyburski, but with more concern than before. This was




Tyburski relentlessly persevered through injury.





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starting to become a little too frequent to be even in the realms of normality. What to do?

"I said to them, 'OK, we go as far as I can every day. I'll push myself to my limit until I pass out every day, because I have now five days to get to Monaco.'

Not surprisingly, his crew weren't happy with that given the potential long-term damage he might inflict upon himself, although Luke was dead-set on carrying on with his plan. "The thing that saved my long-term health was that when I woke up for the third day of running, I couldn't walk because of my quad tear and the tightness in my hamstring." He could only manage 10 kilometres before he initiated every form of treatment he could think of including strapping, taping and bandaging his bad leg. But this only got him as far as 17 kilometres. "I thought to myself, I have over 400 kilometres to go to get to Monaco – how am I going to finish this thing?"

He considered a few options, one of which included walking. This would obviously take way too long, so was shelved as fast as the thought had crossed his mind. Dropping out all-together wasn't an option because it quite simply was not an option! So, Luke looked outside the box of his own self-imposed parameters to formulate a plan that still fell within the greater goal of completing the distance as a triathlon. He had already swum, ridden and run – 25 kilometres, 1300 kilometres, and 137 kilometres – an undeniable triathlon. To reach Monaco, he decided, even though he basically had the use of only one leg, to get back onto his bike and grind this thing out, all the way to Monte Carlo.

"Those 70 kilometres of the cycle to finish that day's distance were the most agonising kilometres I did over the entire 2000 of The Ultimate Triathlon. Every time I bent my knee – and because I was clipped into the pedals – I had no choice but to bend my left (bad) leg, it was like a knife stabbing into my quad. And then as I was straightening it, it was like the knife being pulled out while being twisted. Then my hamstring gripped like it was in a vice."

To make it worse, he had to keep his leg moving to avoid a complete and total seize-up. There was no free-wheeling on this journey! When the 70 kilometres was done, he held on to the side of the van while his bike was slid from under him before he was carried into the back.

Three-hundred and 50 kilometres in three days was what remained. The breakdown would be one 150-kilometre day followed by two 100-kilometre days. The hills were excruciating as his left leg was employed to assist the good right leg. As he came into Toulon, en-route to Hyeres and the end of the 150 kilometres he realised his crew were stuck in traffic. A quick Google search

for directions to the agreed hotel saw him arrive safely but way before the van. They found him lying on the grass outside the accommodations just waiting to be, once again, carried to his resting place. The penultimate 100-kilometre journey of day 11 was a day to forget. In fact, he really can't remember much of it, "... just because I was in a massive pain locker, just wanted to get through the day, hated the surroundings, hated life to be honest ..."

But the final day along the Riviera was different. The route took him through Cannes and Nice, and up around the hills, beholding magnificent Mediterranean vistas approaching Monaco. He could finally feel success in the air as he neared the destination of Monte Carlo. Although he was still in intense pain, it was a sunny day; he knew it was close to being over. But he had one final insistence, and that was to run into Monaco.

"I told the guys I was running into Monaco. There's no way in hell I'm cycling into Monaco!" They didn't quite understand, because by this stage he was getting about on crutches when he wasn't on the bike. "They asked if I meant I was running with crutches, but I said no – I don't care if I stop one kilometre or even 100 meters before the border, pull the car over, I'm giving you the bike and I'm running into Monaco!"

As he passed the signs that informed him of his approaching destiny, and as those final kilometres reached single figures – five kilometres, three kilometres, one kilometre to Monaco – he saw the crew on the side of the road. He stopped for them to remove his cycling clothes and dress him in his running shorts and shoes. His crutches were offered to him but were swiftly rejected. He was running into Monaco!

About 150 metres away was a roundabout in the centre of which lay a rock that read, 'Principaute de Monaco' – the official border of Monaco. This was the goal. "I hobbled that 150 meters, I saw this sun-soaked rock that said Monaco, there was the finishing banner – Morocco to Monaco, 2000 kilometres in 12 days – and I fell lips first onto this rock to give it a big kiss." While it may not have gone totally according to plan, Luke Tyburski had completed a goal that began with a wishful glance at the world map. That piece of water and coastline that jumped off the map and into his imagination had just, in the space of 12 challenging and painful yet serene and beautiful days, passed beneath him. He had gone the distance under his own steam in a time he was told couldn't be done. He had completed his ultimate triathlon.

"... And I lingered and I stopped and I remember saying to myself, 'Savour this moment, Luke, because right now, in this very moment, is the beginning of the rest of your life.'" ■