

CAUGHT IN THE ACT — OF — BECOMING

What do you do when you're forced to draw the pursuit of a childhood dream to a close?
Former professional soccer player Luke Tyburski decided to create a new one.

Words: Christian Newbold



A desert is a place without expectation. But the absence of expectation opens the door to possibility, and humankind, in our ceaseless yearning for something greater than ourselves, has always known this. So we banish ourselves into exile and seek to purge everything that has come before, intent on finding our next best thing. We were told by Antoine De Saint-Exupéry in *The Little Prince*, "One sits down on a desert sand dune, sees nothing, hears nothing. Yet through the silence something throbs, and gleams."

Adventure athlete, Luke Tyburski found himself in such a position – exiled in the desert engrossed in self-kenosis – after yet another injury that further loosened his tenuous grip on a professional soccer career that had taken him from his hometown of Bathurst, NSW, to Sydney, then to the USA, Belgium, and finally settled him in England; but at what price? Three surgeries in 11 months (two foot surgeries and one on his shoulder) and countless soft-tissue injuries. He was aboard a ship sinking into the quagmire of depression.

"I had a friend back in Oz (Australia) who used to run marathons, and he told me one day about this crazy race – the toughest race in the world – The Marathon des Sables," says Tyburski, discussing the day he made the decision to give his boyhood professional soccer dream away for good. "I was icing my calf after another failed training session, and for some stupid reason this race just popped into my head. I Googled it and I found it and it was in five month's time. So, I called them up, paid my deposit and before I knew it, I had a place in this crazy race!"

The Marathon des Sables is a seven-day, 250-kilometre footrace across the Moroccan portion of the Sahara desert. Having never run further than around seven kilometres without a break, Tyburski had just entered arguably the toughest footrace on the planet. "Quite literally, I decided to sign up within an hour of deciding to quit football." A quantum leap had just taken Tyburski from a vague vision of himself as an

adventurer to the stark reality of a start at the Marathon des Sables. Though still five months away, it was a race across an alien landscape in a discipline he knew nothing about. Nothing!

This was a new Luke Tyburski, where the middle-man of pragmatic reasoning was ignored in his decision-making process – decide and do was plenty enough.

His baptism into the world of endurance sports was the 27th edition of the Marathon des Sables (MDS). Although aiming for a top-50 finish, he struggled to run with any consistency throughout the race owing to an iliotibial band injury, some horrific blisters, which appeared all over his toes from the second day and got progressively worse, and a stomach virus that left him severely dehydrated and requiring an IV drip at 25 kilometres into the 85-kilometre-long stage on day four. He limped home in 224th position out of the 750 who finished from the 860 starters.

While his failure to achieve his goal of a top-50 finish is testament to his rank-amateurism, it was perhaps a miracle he finished at all. Maybe if he knew it would be so tough he wouldn't have entered in the first place. Blissful ignorance has saved many from a fate worse than a death-march struggle to finish – not to have started at all!

But more important than any other detail was his cerebral experience that gave credence to this wild plan; that filled the void created by his Saharan catharsis. "The story behind the story is that when I was out in the desert, it was the first time in years that I actually felt truly alive, that I was living my life. And I felt like the depression had kept me in a cave, and out in the desert it truly dawned on me that this is what I want to do." In the silence of the dunes, though stumbling and blistering in the 50-plus-degree temperatures, a new sense of self throbbed and gleamed.

And it was a lucky thing, too. Even before he completed the MDS, his mind was already thinking beyond the Sahara. "If I'm going to do this, I needed to do something big! I needed something that would put me on the map as an adventurer,



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and would grab people's attention so they can see the message I'm trying to put across."

His callow adventuring eyes fell upon a world map where a specific route popped out at him – a two-thousand kilometre stretch of water and coast line starting with the Strait of Gibraltar from northern Morocco to the southern tip of Spain, then extending the length of the Spanish coastline to join the coastline of southern France and finishing in Monte-Carlo, Monaco.

With the only prerequisite being the idea of 'adventure', and despite not owning a bike, or having swum at all since high school some 10 years earlier, Luke Tyburski – Adventurer, who had only just started training for his first ultra (which just happened to be his first ever race) gave birth to The Ultimate Triathlon – Morocco to Monaco, 2000 kilometres in 12 days!

Upon his return from 'the desert', as he poignantly refers to his MDS adventure, he set to work on The Ultimate Triathlon. He had already achieved a Bachelor's degree in Exercise Science during his time playing soccer at Southern Nazarene University in Oklahoma, USA, and was already working as a personal trainer. He threw himself into building his personal brand with the sole purpose of making a living as an adventurer.

"Through my adventures and challenges, I want to not only inspire people to live their life, achieve the goals they've always wanted to achieve, and make the unthinkable a reality, but also to create awareness that anyone who suffers from a mental health illness can still achieve the unimaginable."

Tyburski is not only a man of his word, but also a man of deeds. Anything he does is achieved with an ethos that is entrenched in adventure, and this was certainly reflected in his training and preparation for The Ultimate Triathlon.

En route he chalked up quite the resume of adventurous achievements. He once decided he would learn to surf, believing it an essential requirement of an Australian living in London. So he found the closest surf school to his home in London, and rode a newly purchased bike there – he didn't own one previously. But given the lack of waves on the Thames, his ride was a deliberately long affair. He rode 410 kilometres in a single 18-hour day to the Escape Surf School in Newquay on the southwest coast of England. This accounted for a good six months of cycle training toward the big one.

As part of his run training he found the Everest Ultra Marathon, a 65-kilometre race that begins

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5200 metres above sea level at Gorakshep and descends to Lukla at an altitude of 2900 metres.

"Before the Everest Ultra, I spent three weeks living, training, eating, and getting to know two of Nepal's top ultra runners, Aite Tamang and Upendra Sunuwar. This was a great opportunity to see just what makes these phenomenal runners tick and how they go about their daily lives and training routines."

But the race itself didn't go according to plan. To reach the starting line at Everest base camp, competitors had to trek from Lukla to Gorakshep over a period of 10-days. Because of the altitude and unsanitary conditions that exist at such a remote location, Tyburski suffered altitude sickness and a bout of giardia 36 hours before the race. The resulting vomiting and diarrhoea ravaged his body and left him with severe dehydration.

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Twelve hours before the start of the race, the organisers decided that for his survival he needed to lose some altitude, and quickly. "At nine o'clock at night in the pitch black a Sherpa took me 10 kilometres down the mountain and basically left me there," says Tyburski highlighting the fine line between life and death at high altitude. "I woke up at five o'clock the next day and I had 55 kilometres to get back down the mountain to where the race finished in Lukla by myself." There's nothing like the adventure of being on the edge of Everest having not eaten or drunk for two-and-a-half days with a lone 55-kilometres to travel to make it out. It may not have been the official Everest Ultra Marathon, but he did cover the distance.

Despite the suffering, he recalls his time in Nepal fondly. "I had a magical time, made some life long friends, and fell in love with this beautiful country. The Nepali people are some of the most generous, caring, and hospitable people I've ever met. I will never forget just how welcome they all made me feel." And his association with Tamang and Sunuwar became the catalyst for his next training session as he agreed to help his new running friends at an ultra run in Hong Kong. But before that and given he was on the road, he figured he could spin his own adventure off the back of this opportunity.

He settled on an audacious plan to travel to Hainan Island in the South China Sea and partake of his own remote trail run around and up Wuzhi Mountain to 1840 metres, sleeping in a hammock and eating what he could carry as well as tropical fruits and local produce before making his way back to civilisation in the city of Sanya, back to civilisation before heading to Hong Kong to help Tamang and Sunuwar, which he eventually did. But he hadn't accounted for the destruction that was wrought upon Hainan by Super Typhoon Rammasun. He



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arrived to find battered and essentially unusable infrastructure. He finally persuaded a taxi driver to drive him into the interior of the island – which cleaned out his wallet – so he could undertake his planned adventure. He found himself once again outsmarted by the fickle hand of fate. He eventually covered 90 kilometres over two days. He slept in his hammock in the pouring rain, ate discarded coconuts from the side of the road and the kindly offerings of oranges from roadside vendors. If not for the generosity of the locals who recognised he was in some degree of physical and dietary stress, he may still be out there among the natural beauty of Hainan Island. Another experience survived; another step toward his ultimate goal.

By now he was gaining invaluable experience surviving difficult situations and learning to will himself through when the going got tough – skills he knew he would require if he was to be successful at The Ultimate Triathlon. The only thing he lacked was some actual triathlon experience, and with his experiences thus far exceeding even his own expectations, just any old triathlon simply would not do!

His entry into the Double Brutal Triathlon that runs through the Snowdonia national park in Wales, UK was a good idea. It forced him to pragmatically plan how he was going to finish his first official triathlon. "My plan for completing The Double Brutal Extreme Triathlon was simple: swim, eat, bike, eat, run, eat...and then eat some more." Simple in theory and, thanks to his passion for cooking and baking his own natural, energy- and nutrient-dense superfood energy bars, his plan seemed brilliant in theory.


To make it through the 7.6-kilometre swim he did have to learn to swim first, though. To achieve this he joined a swim squad run by fellow Australian Fiona Ford. He could call upon his 410-kilometre ride to Newquay during the 360-kilometre bike leg that included 5000 metres of climbing. His running exploits took care of preparations for the double marathon run leg of the Double Brutal that itself included some 3000 metres of climbing. Yes, that's right – his first triathlon was a double ironman.

It took him two hours and 59 minutes to complete the eight-lap swim course, which was fairly impressive for someone who had never completed a triathlon before. This preceded the eight-lap cycle course that boasted scenery he recalls as "magnificent, with the course weaving in and out of jagged-edged mountains, next to pristine lakes and through small villages, which nearly seem to have more pubs than houses."

After 18 hours and 30 minutes battling freezing temperatures and the need for sleep, he was able to dismount his bike and commence the 84-kilometre run that begins with a summit of Mount Snowdon. But, running with his support crew guide, things weren't as straightforward as he would have hoped. "We missed the blatant turnoff to head up the main track towards the summit. We ended up at the front door of someone's house. Doubling back on ourselves, a brief look at the map and a sharp scramble, we eventually found the trail we needed to be on."

After descending Mount Snowdon to Llanberis, the final eight laps of an 8.4-kilometre run course were all that stood between him and finishing his first triathlon. While it wasn't easy, and he had his fair share of torturous moments, he completed the Double Brutal. "I loved every minute of my first ever triathlon, and I may just do another one." His time was a continuous 35 hours, 46 minutes, and 27 seconds.

This represented just over a quarter of what Luke Tyburski had set out to achieve as he envisioned himself as a great adventurer a few years earlier. He had subjected himself to some maddening experiences and had taken himself way, way outside his comfort zone. Every step of the way he had proven to himself he could go farther than he thought possible. The true test, however, lay ahead as his magnum opus drew ever nearer. The Ultimate Triathlon was on the horizon.

Get your hands on the next edition of TMSM to find out how Luke Tyburski fared on his mission to swim, bike and run from Morocco to Monaco. 

MY PLAN FOR
COMPLETING THE
DOUBLE BRUTAL
EXTREME TRIATHLON
WAS SIMPLE: SWIM, EAT,
BIKE, EAT, RUN, EAT...
AND THEN EAT SOME
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