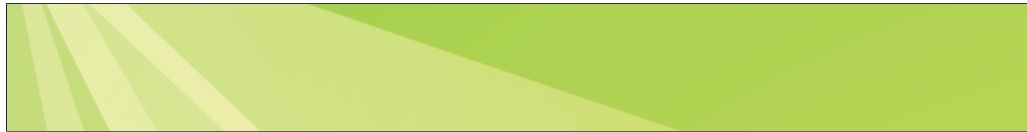




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Postcards From Panama: A glimpse at the Portobelo International Off-Road Triathlon

By Melaina Juntti, InsideTri.com editor
Posted Mar. 16, 2008



Transition in the fort

Photo: Andres Villa

Last weekend, I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to travel to Panama to check out the 10th annual Portobelo International Off-Road Triathlon. Set in the lush junglescape and mountains surrounding the Atlantic seaside town of Portobelo, an hour-and-a-half drive along a meandering two-lane road from Panama City, this race serves up one of the beastliest multisport challenges on earth amid one of the most jaw-droppingly gorgeous backdrops.

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The brainchild of Ironman Hawaii founders John and Judy Collins, this dicey off-road romp has burgeoned from a small, grassroots event to a much-revered fixture on the world multisport calendar, securing a spot on many triathletes' lists of "Do Before You Die" races. Triathlon greats Scott Tinley, Carol Montgomery, Jimmy Riccitello and Jim Vance have all tackled the Portobelo race, which draws between 50 and 100 athletes to its start line each year.

Backing this super-successful event is the Union de Triatlón de Panama, a fierce force of volunteers who share the common goal of elevating triathlon to a national stage within Panama and equipping the nation's young multisport athletes with the means to compete on an international level. Federation president Allan Baitel, a native Panamanian who lived in the U.S. for several years, met the Collinses years ago when the couple docked their boat at a Portobelo pier. Together they crafted the Portobelo International—and Baitel has not lost an ounce of fire for the event since. Though not a triathlete, Baitel is impassioned about bringing attention to the sport he's come to love as well as opening the world's eyes to the nation he's long adored.



Forts line the Portobelo shores

Photo: Andres Villa

So when the opportunity arose for me to hop a jet to Panama to check out this notoriously awesome race and beautiful country, I jumped.

A distinct buzz of excitement filled the air the morning of March 9, as throngs of volunteers, supporters and athletes scurried about the La Guayra start area marking bodies, tuning bikes and shoveling down last-minute race fuel. The field of 64 racers—57 men and seven women—was a hodgepodge of age, ability and background, as gray-haired, bronze-skinned lifelong adventure junkies lined up next to nervous novices and elite Central American short coursers clad in spiffy speedsuits.

The starting gun fired at 7:30 a.m. as scheduled, which, in Panama, is an anomaly since Panamanian Time is a lot looser than what we go by in the States. "When we first started this race years ago, athletes were showing up late, getting angry when we wouldn't let them in after the race had started," Baitel says. "But now athletes expect it to begin on time. I challenge you to find another sporting event in Panama that starts when it's supposed to."



Splash 'n' dash!

Photo: Andres Villa

Kicking off the race, the Portobelo swim is renowned for the warm, crystal-clear waters in which jellyfish, starfish and—in the words of one teenaged Panamanian triathlete—"ugly fish" sightings are common. As the athletes stroked the 900 meters to the turnaround on Isla Grande, Emanuel Lema of Argentina powered out a commanding lead, holding it throughout the 1.8km leg to finish over two minutes ahead of fellow Argentine Leandro González Bonet. Costa Rican up-and-comer Viviana Chavarría gave the boys a run for their money, logging a fourth-best overall swim time of 27:22 to lead next-closest female Mayli Cuipers of Florida by three minutes, 10 seconds.



Upon exiting the water, the dripping-wet racers tore up the beach and through a giant XTERRA-style inflate-a-gate to the first transition, where the real, gnarly test began. Upon grabbing their wheels and pedaling out of T1, the athletes embarked on one of the most beautiful yet burliest bike courses on the planet.

It's impossible to see everything the route has to offer without mounting a fat-tired rig and tackling it yourself. But riding shotgun in Baitel's diesel pickup as he powered over rocks and ruts, jumping out every so often to set up cones and give flags to local farm boys, gave me a pretty in-depth look at what these off-road rock stars were up against.

For 35 kilometers, the racers battle near-45 degree climbs, sudden dips, gravelly terrain, flora-strewn bottoms and sharp turns past cattle-penning fences—not to mention hair-curling humidity and scalding heat. Luckily, this year's athletes were blessed with slight overcast and a peppering of cooling rain.

Still, for as meaty of a challenge the Portobelo bike course dishes out, the scenery surrounding it is something out of an adventure novel. The initial out-and-back section pokes through thick stands of tropical trees and winds past modest, arbor-shrouded homes. Free-roaming cattle and stealthy little monkeys line the route as well, while cocksure roosters strut and crow along the way.

Roughly one-third of the way in, racers enter an even trickier stretch, beginning the unforgiving climb up the region's tallest peak. The nasty ascent requires even the best mountain bikers to dismount and carry their rigs. But once they drop from the heights and emerge from the jungle, the athletes turn onto the cracked, pot-holed road that leads into the small seaside village of Portobelo.

Once in town, bikers meander past a 500-year-old Spanish church, the remains of a pirate-era fort and rows of houses and shops set mere inches off the road. And then there's T2 - set in a massive stone fort built by the Spanish in the 1500s to fend off marauders such as loathed British buccaneer Sir Henry Morgan. After tearing down one final hill, shooting up a quick rise and making a sharp right to the fort's entrance, athletes dismount and walk their wheels through a narrow open doorway toward the bike racks.

While Baitel and I had been roaring diesel-style through the jungle, checking in with the various race judges stationed along the bike course, we were told that Lema was killing it on two wheels and had amassed a near-10-minute lead on chasers Ronan Pavoni of Argentina, González Bonet, Panama's own Gabriel González and Orion Akerson of Costa Rica. "That's an incredible lead for this point in the race," said an amazed Baitel. "Usually the leader only has a two- or three-minute lead by T2."

We motored back to Portobelo just in time to pull the truck to the side of the road and catch the frontrunners scoot through the stone corridor into transition. To our surprise, it was Pavoni—not Lema—who flew down the hill from Portobelo first, indicating he'd somehow eaten up his competitor's giant lead. But despite the bevy of flag wavers and time judges lining the road, the Argentine accidentally veered off the course too early, streaking across the grass to the transition exit rather than cresting the last mini-hill and entering through the proper door.

Since the misstep cost Pavoni more time than had he stayed on course, no penalties were assessed. Lema, González and González Bonet all rolled in within two to four minutes of the leader, setting the stage for a killer showdown on the final 10km run.

In the women's race, Chavarria, an elite road triathlete and adventure racer in her native Costa Rica, kept the lead through the bike leg, busting out a fastest-female time of 2:00:33. But American Allie Silverman, a New Yorker who'd studied in Panama on a Fulbright scholarship two years prior, kept hot on Chavarria's treads despite dropping her chain and having to run with her bike on her back for the final stretch of the course. "I could see Allie coming fast so I thought, 'Oh no! I have to hurry,'" said Chavarria after the race.

Onto the run, the triathletes hotfooted it back into town, where they turned off on a steep, house-lined side street before tearing into the jungle at the road's dead end. After some gritty up-and-downs over rock- and root-strewn ground, the competitors popped out of the woods to make the final dash to the finish line.

Pavoni maintained his advantage on the run, but a determined González, who'd been hanging tough in third place, was dead-set on spoiling the Argentine's day. The home-country hero turned on the jets, first passing Lema then making a dramatic push to overtake the frontrunner Pavoni.



Rounding a curve
Photo: Andres Villa



Soak it all in
Photo: Andres Villa



Into T2
Photo: Andres Villa



The final leg
Photo: Andres Villa

Looking strong despite the fast-rising temperatures, a silver-and-white-suited González never looked back, streaking solo through the streets of Portobelo to break the tape first in 2:35:27. Pavoni strode in one minute, 22 seconds behind the Panamanian for second, while González Bonet took the bronze in 2:37:24. Early race leader Lema finished over six minutes later in fourth place and American-born Akerson, brother of 2007 winner Rom Akerson, took fifth in 2:49:25.

There were fewer surprises in the women's race, as a worn-down yet resilient Chavarria came in first in 3:40:23, four minutes, 14 seconds ahead of next-fastest female Silverman. "I felt strong in the swim but not so much on the bike," said Chavarria. "And I had the worst run. This year's race was much tougher than 2006."

Forty-one-year-old Cuipers looked strong as she crossed the line less than five minutes after Silverman to nab the bronze. A 20-year triathlon veteran, Cuipers was more than pleased with her fast finishing time. She'd read about the event in *Inside Triathlon's* TriGuide a few years back and has wanted to attempt this legendary race ever since. "The race was really fun," said Cuipers at the finish line. "It had rained on top of the mountain so the bike course was slick in parts, but there were beautiful views of the valleys." About her female competitors, she added: "These girls [Chavarria and Silverman] were strong. I knew Chavarria was going to outrun me."

After a rollicking post-race fiesta and awards ceremony that carried on until the final finishers crossed the line, freshly massaged athletes, sunburned spectators and exhausted volunteers began to slowly disperse, the whole crowd satisfied with the stellar event it had partaken in yet eager to vegetate after so many hours in the sun.

Baitel, who'd gotten a mere three hours of sleep the night before the race, said he had zero mental or physical energy left once he returned home to Panama City. And it's no wonder—Baitel, along with his dedicated, hard-working crew, labored for months on end to orchestrate this amazing annual event.



Gonzalez wins!
Photo: Andres Villa

"It's not easy," says Baitel of putting on the race. "We have to assure the area farmers that routing the race through their property won't disturb their cows. We have to close off sections of the road to make room for the athletes. Plus, we transport the athletes' transition-area gear to the finish line. It's a lot of work."

But it's work that Baitel and company are more than happy to do. "This race *is* Portobelo," he beams. "It's about the entire community. It has become an institution. We want people from all over to see this beautiful event."

After spending a few quick days in the sea-lining jungle and witnessing this intricately crafted, flawlessly executed triathlon, I wholeheartedly suggest that you do.

Special thanks to Allan Baitel and the Union de Triatlon de Panama for the amazing experience. And thank you to race photographer Andres Villa for providing the wonderful images.

More race photos to come!

Portobelo International Off-Road Triathlon

Portobelo, Panama

Sunday, March 9, 2008

1.8km S/35km B/10km R

Men's Results

1. Gabriel González (PAN) 2:35:27
2. Ronan Pavoni (ARG) 2:36:49
3. Leandro González Bonet (ARG) 2:37:24
4. Emanuel Lema (ARG) 2:43:50
5. Orión Akerson (CRC) 2:49:25

Women's Results

1. Viviana Chavarria (CRC) 3:40:23
2. Allie Silverman (USA) 3:44:37
3. Mayli Cuipers (USA) 3:49:12
4. Yelena Rodriguez (PAN) 4:20:37
5. Geisa Díaz (PAN) 4:25:12

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