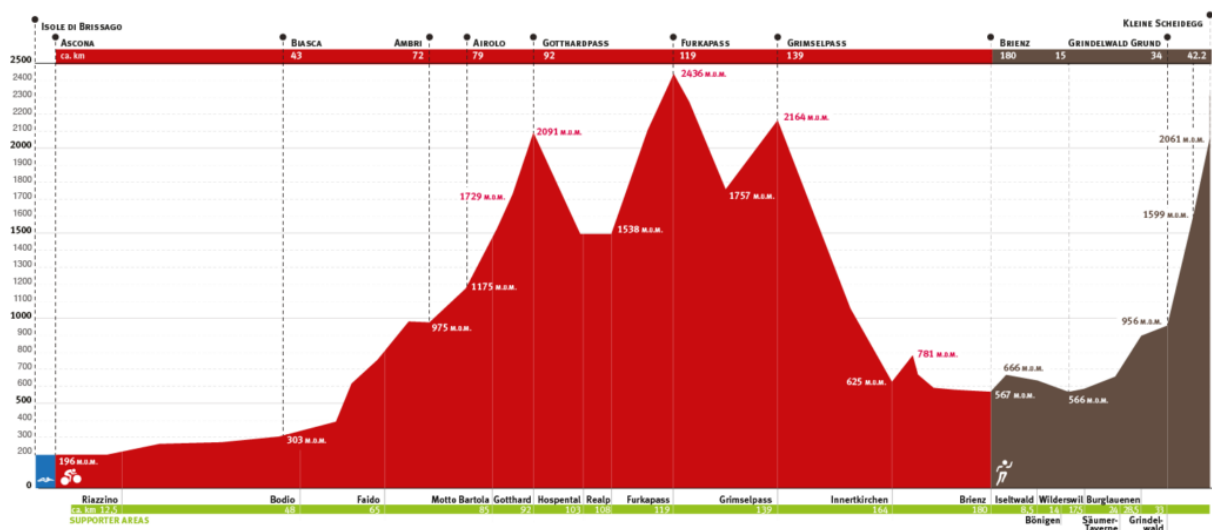


Swissman II

Sometimes the sequels live up to the billing.....

Swissman is an extreme triathlon, the distances involved are similar to that of an Ironman a 3.8km swim, a 180km bike ride and a 42km run but that's where the comparisons end. The race is a point to point race which see competitors climbing more than 5500m from the start in southern Switzerland via three huge mountain passes and finishes in the heart of Switzerland against the backdrop of the Eiger, Monch and Jungfrau mountains. The race forms part of the Xtri world tour series that includes the iconic Norseman and Celtman and will soon feature events in Alaska, Canada and Slovakia.

The Swissman course



Swissman has been unescapable factor in my life since November 2015 when I first received an entry to compete in the 2016 race. I was bitterly disappointed to return from that race having registered my first ever Did Not finish (DNF) thwarted by a combination of user error (getting lost) and sheer bad luck with weather conditions that eventually led organisers to force competitors to retire. For a whole year I had to deal with the nagging question of could I have made it and could I prove to those that perhaps doubted my ability and determination that under the right conditions, I actually could.

Given the field of 250 is selected by lottery I am extremely grateful to the organisers for somehow ensuring that I was lucky enough to get that chance again in 2017. The downside of having to try again was having to train night and day or was that morning and night for another six months and to destroy oneself every weekend in the hope of somehow preparing yourself for that epic day in the mountains. My training this year was hampered by picking up a knee injury in January that really limited my ability to get much running training in, in fact I was only able to really run a month before the event, luckily bike training wasn't affected so this year my preparations were heavily skewed towards the bike but that left me somewhat apprehensive that my long dated fitness may desert me.

Events tend to come around faster than you anticipate, although this year I felt exhausted by early June and was glad for the opportunity to taper and rest up. Swissman, requires you to provide your own support for the duration of the race. Your supporter is responsible for helping you in transition zones, and providing supplements along the route as well as accompanying you on the final leg of the race.

This year I recruited Justin an experienced triathlete with experience of these extreme races and a legendary black Norseman T shirt to his name, who CV listed photography, motivational speaking, a warped sense of humour and a charitable disposition as key attributes. This year I didn't need to wonder what could go wrong, I had already experienced that play book, this year was all about what was going to go right.



We flew to Switzerland on the Wednesday got settled into our hotel in stunning Ascona before doing some route inspections on the Thursday and attending the race briefing on the Friday. With everything set of the Saturday I turned in for the night for what would be five hours of staring at the ceiling awaiting the alarm clock to go at 2.30 am and race day.

The wakeup call duly arrived and I looked outside, clear skies, no thunderstorms this year the swim would happen. We packed up our remaining bits into our vehicle and I tried to force down as much food as the nerves would allow and we left for the first transition zone at around 3am. Bike setup was a relatively calm affair and I felt fairly relaxed as I prepared to board the boat at 4am that would take us to the Islands of Brissago (www.myswitzerland.com/en-us/sole-di-brissago.html) in the middle of Lake Maggiore. With a huge amount of fanfare the boat departed at 4.15am for a very leisurely trip to the islands which are about 3km away. I was lucky enough to grab a few minutes with the James Lawrence a.k.a the Iron Cowboy, (<https://www.ironcowboy.com/about/>) as we departed the boat, no shortage of inspiration there.



We collected our thoughts and waded into the water which was a tepid 20 degrees, positively balmy for those used to Cape Town's waters. There was a great vibe as we treaded water awaiting the start, scheduled to coincide with the summer solstice the light was beginning to make its presence known, illuminating the mountains and drawing our attention to an orange flashing light that marked our exit point in the distance. At 5a.m the cow bells rang and we were off, my plan was settle into a comfortable routine and not push too hard, in the event I tucked into a group of swimmers and choose to stick behind them minimising the effort required on my part. Swimming in the lake proved much easier than the sea, sighting was easy (nice not to swim 500m more than you

need too) and there were no waves to contend with. We made good progress and if I'd not been tempted to try and clear my fogging goggles, I could have stayed with this group the whole way. But that momentary pause allowed the group to get away and I have to work for the last km, exiting the water in an hour and five mins feeling fresh was, however, a great start to the day. I even looked quite professional as I ran up the beach undoing the wetsuit as I went. If it hadn't been for the small slope of the beach and wobbly legs I probably wouldn't have fallen over shattering the illusion.

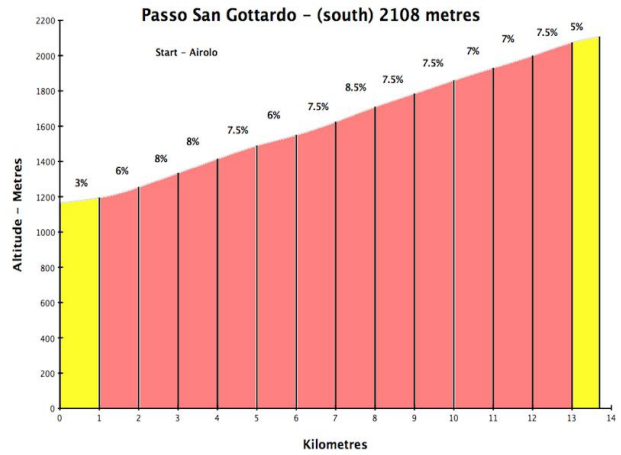
Composure regained, it was time to don the Lycra for the daunting bike leg. The first part of the bike involves navigating your way out of town and onto the roads that take you to the mountains, it was here that I experienced problems last year. This year the setup was completely different, marshals on every turn clearly indicating the way on, no need to slow into junctions all very obvious and a big credit to the organisers who are seeking ways to improve the athlete experience year after year. I waved at Justin as agreed at 15km to reassure him everything was good with the bike. At around 30km the undulations came as you begin to work your way through the villages that lead to the main climbs. I was perhaps a still a bit keen here putting down 250-300 watts to keep up a nice pace. Next stop was around 55km just before the climbing begins, from here to Airolo at 80km there is around 700m of climbing through a series of villages with lots of great support from the roadside. Everything was fine until around 75km when the shadow of the mountains deserted us and it felt like someone had opened the oven door. By the time I reached our next support zone at 80km I was really feeling the heat, which by then was 27 degrees. Airolo marks the start of the first real climb. San Gottard Pass which connects the southern Italian speaking (Ticino) part of Switzerland with the Northern German speaking (Uri) region, the route to the top is around 14km long with around 8km of this on the cobbled section (Tremola) which is the old road over the mountain.

The cobbled section of Tremola on the left and the new pass over the mountain on the right.



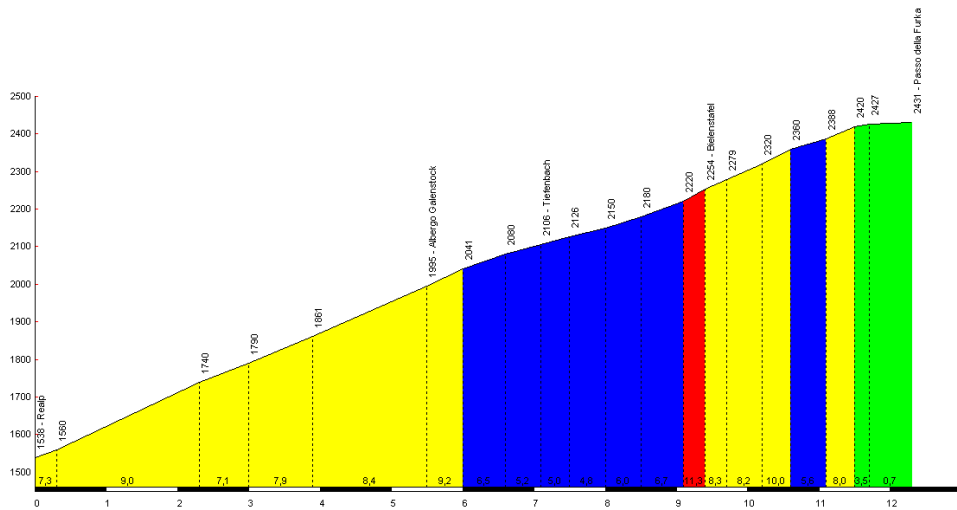
I really suffered with the heat on this first climb, but how often do you get the thrill of riding 24 cobbled switch backs, it really is part of the experience you signed up for.

The top of the first climb marks the half way point on the bike, but only the beginning of the suffering. The decent before the next climb was a welcome rest bite for the legs and the rush of air helped cool us down. We meet up next at the base of the next big climb.



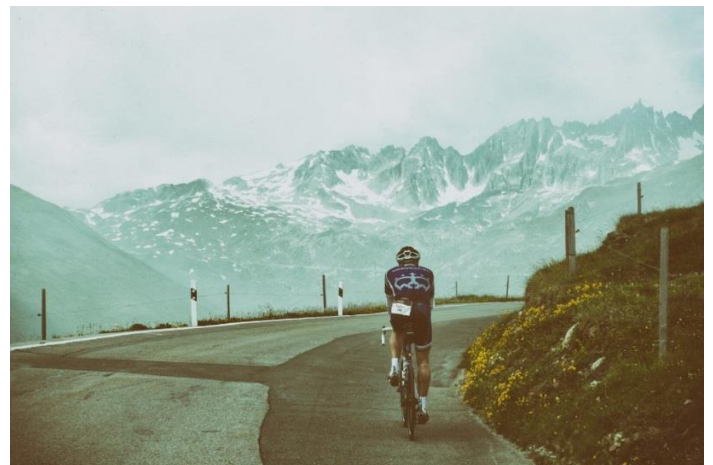
The second climb is the steepest. Furka pass is sometimes referred to as James Bond Street having featured in the Goldfinger movie, when asked about it my friend merely refers to it as “The Bastard” and that it is. Last year, the weather really hit us hard on this climb making it probably the toughest climb I’ve ever experienced, not surprisingly this year I was a little apprehensive.

Passo della Furka, da Realp



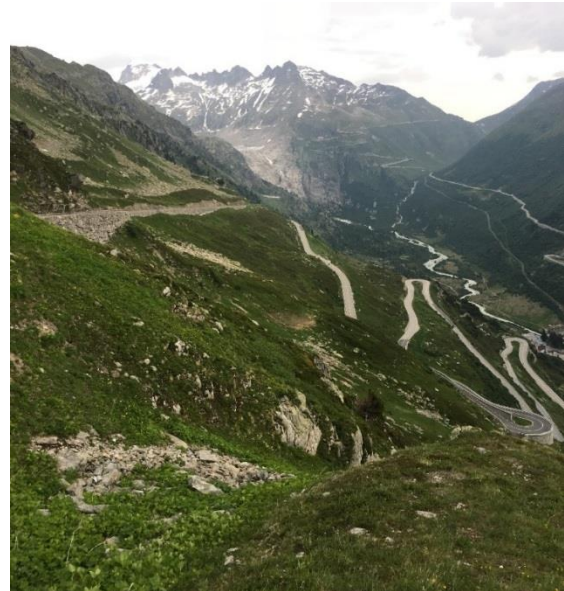
Climbing Furka

The climb, although long was fine apart from two factors, the heat which rose as high as 34 degrees on the lower half (& 22 degrees at the top compared to zero last year) and the presence of the Porsche club of the Netherlands who had decided today was the day to buzz cyclists.



The descent from Furka may only be 700m but it's fairly dramatic with some great switch backs at the top (see middle of the pic) and then a long run along the side of the mountain before the third climb, Grimsel pass (seen on the left of the pic). Grimsel is fairly straight forward with 400m of climbing over six switch backs

At the top of Grimsel I got the news from Justin that there had been two separate accidents on the decent involving motorbikes (& one sadly involved the fatality of a cyclist) and that the road was blocked to vehicles and hence support crews. The police were on the scene and planned to let cyclist through once the investigating officers had documented the scene. This meant carrying a rucksack on the descent which Justin had prepared with my running stuff. The descent of 1500m is fantastic after all that climbing as you weave past several large dams and through short tunnels. I managed to pass a few more cautious cyclists here hitting 86kmph a one point.



Then we came upon the accidents and had to wait to proceed past the wreckage. After 165km there is a small rise of 150m then a relatively flat run into the second transition zone at 180km. Having been on the bike for 10hs and 12 mins I was grateful it was over.

Transition 2 was far from slick, the accident meant competitors were without their support crews and fatigue added to the lack of urgency. I sat down, ate and did far too much talking before mustering the energy to get moving again. When I had stopped to wait for the accident to clear I had bumped into a competitor that I spent a lot of time with the previous year and we teamed up again in T2 with a view to running together. Ghalib, had come over from Canada where he lives but was seeking to be the first representative from Pakistan to complete the race.

The first 3km of the run climbs around 200m to the impressive Giessbach waterfall which flows into Lake Brienz, we choose to power walk this session, running wouldn't have been any faster and a lot more tiring. The power walking strategy would turn out to be a feature of the run. The route takes you on a path behind the waterfall before descending back into the forest. The heat and the water from the falls made conditions very humid but we were progressing well, running at 5mins a km. We decided to slow a little knowing full well that probably wouldn't last the full distance. We were grateful to see one of the support zone as we had been without water due to the disrupted supporter logistics.



After about 9km we came out of the forest and onto the flat tar alongside the lake this was more comfortable running terrain. At around 12km my support crew appeared on my bike, back under his watchful eye any sign of shirking was quickly set upon. After the refuelling stop at 14km we agreed to meet our support crews again at 24km. We maintained a good pace until that support zone running just below the 6m a km pace and powerwalking the odd steep section. We came across quite a few competitors walking around the 20km stage and we tried to motivate them to join us, a few did but they didn't seem to have the drive to stick with it.



We knew the final climb was going to be very tough and worked towards a 9.30pm arrival at the final checkpoint at 33km. We were pretty broken at the 24km support zone, while Ghalib's mum massaged his legs. I decided to down a chocolate milk drink, which promptly reappeared creating a bit of drama. The marshal seemed somewhat concerned as I coughed and spluttered as we headed back out. From 24km the course climbs for the next 5km which is pretty tough and disheartening when you're chasing the clock. Then it levels off, taking you back into the forest for the final 4km to Grindelwald. I think we surprised ourselves that after 16hrs on the go were still holding a 5m30s a km pace. We got to the final check point at 9.38pm extremely relieved. I was just so pleased my knee had held out. While 4h40m might sound a long time to cover 33km. I can only look back on the run and marvel at what we achieved, we never let up and ran every bit we conceivable could.

The 33km point is where your supporter joins you for the final leg of the journey. From here it's compulsory to carry a rucksack with warm clothes, food, water and a light. The final climb ascends 1100m over 9km up a gravel track. There's a slight sense that you've made it, the hard works done but the first section out of Grindelwald is particularly steep and in the dwindling light the legs weren't happy.



As the darkness falls, it's difficult with the head torch to see that far ahead. The darkness makes it difficult to judge the inclines and with tired legs you become a little clumsy. The euphoria of making the cut off fades fairly quickly and you're ready for it to be over. We made it into the final aid station around 11pm, it would have been good to finish here as the next hour was a frustrating one.

We could hear the cow bells at the finish but couldn't see them and when we did see the lights they just didn't get any closer, Justin by now had to deal with a bit of whinging on my part. Finally, after around two and a half hours we approached the finish. With the cow bells ringing out we ascended through the line of flags. In all honesty with the lights and after so much time in the dark, I couldn't really see much. We crossed the finish after 19 hours and 13 mins on the go.



Celebrating, takes energy but sitting down with a cup of soup felt like reward enough. After a few minutes with the organisers we made our way down to the bar whilst we awaited the train that would take us back down the mountain to Grindelwald and a comfortable bed. I thought now might be a good time for a loo break, would you believe it, they went and put the facilities down a flight of stairs, not quite what the legs wanted. After descending on the train we finally got back to our hotel room at 2.40am almost exactly 24 hours since we left the last one. Not too long afterwards the drizzle started, I'm pleased the weather at least gave us the courtesy of holding off.



There's no chance of a lie in, as the closing ceremony takes place back up the mountain on the Sunday morning. It was pretty miserable when we got there but the rain abated just in time for the ceremony. It's now you get to hear about just how incredible some of the athletes' performances were. For most of us though, finishing was reward enough.



A great feeling to have that finisher shirt, why blow your own trumpet when the Swiss are on hand to do it for you. Big thanks to Justin for the company and support on the day and for keeping the followers entertained on the Whatsapp line. No thanks would be complete without a thanks to my other half Sal for putting up with this obsession (& the training and moaning) for the last 18 months, at last it's laid to rest.....to be replaced with what, remains to be seen!!!



On a final note. These events are massively gruelling but ultimately hugely rewarding. I would encourage others to believe they are possible. After all if an old weekend warrior like me can make it so can you. To the Red & Black Embark Army enjoy the journey and the rest will fall into place.

For inspiration I always looked to Team Garwood and Supa Piet (no words can do these guys justice) I carried them with me on this journey, just a glance at the tri bars was a reminder that far bigger mountains have been climbed....it's all about how much you want it.

Cheers , Steve P

