

Cambia todo cambia

It is my deseo (what? You read the title and didn't figure on Some Spanish sprinkled throughout the text, Slowtwitch? C'mon you're smarter than that, even the Muricans.) So, as I was Saying... Es mi deseo (since you were cheeky now you have more). Shall we try once more? Es mi deseo that each and every triathlete should have la oportunidad (don't Even) to experience a first place overall at a triathlon. Perhaps a KQ or Kona might be a headier experience but I wouldn't know. I'm just an old mom who caught the bug in 2010 and once I realized that the distance of an Ironman was not, in fact, an impossibility I began to enjoy the sport immensely. I was a fat old lady in 2010 and had just turned 50 and coming out of the "I have no higher desire than being a mother" part of my life and finding my own road - which turned out to be triathlon.

I was never a very good triathlete and have always enjoyed bucking the norm. I only got a tri bike because the derailleur on my 1994 Trek fell off. Early on I found the Slowtwitch forums (yeah, the front page eventually) and learned enough (apparently to become una campeona) to continue to become better and faster. So, sin duda, gracias a Slowtwitch for sharing with the world quite a deep font of knowledge that can take an old mom of 4 lovely children from the "couch" to become La Campeona (did I manage to mention that I became La Campeona?).

So, Cuba.

Back in el verano de 2013 I became aware of a triathlon in Cuba. Now, I have Always been muy interested in Cuba. I think it is an American thing – show us something we can't have and that becomes a desire but for me it was something more, so foreign yet so close to what I was used to In Mexico. Living here and being just a step away from becoming citizens of Mexico, it isn't that much of a mental or logistical reach to get to Cuba. The triathlon entrance fee was very nice and gave a sliding scale for entry – the earlier the entry the cheaper but there was also an insurance available. It seemed very First World and organized.

Triathlon is still new to the country of Mexico and very new to the state I live in, Quintana Roo (and no, we were not named after a bike company but instead Andres Quintana Roo, our first governor, but I digress...) So, to say my expectations were mixed would be a very fair statement but I'm always up for a little adventure so I jumped in and pulled the famdamily down the rabbit hole with me. Still awake Slowtwitch? Real time for me is 3:26 am and the dogs and roosters are keeping me from sleeping. Electricity just came back on so I'm here with you, spinning my tale.

It is really quite simple for an American to get to Cuba and now with the changes Obama is making it is even easier. When I had decided to come a license had to be procured in order to travel legally but many Americans have been visiting Cuba illegally for years with a wink from el gobierno on return to the US ofA. There are 12 valid reasons for visiting Cuba and the most interesting for we triathletes is athletic events and periodismo (now that's not an easy , is it ST. So here's a hint. Superman and Lois Lane both worked in the industry). Now, with Obama's changes, you no longer need the licesnsia but only the reason and Muricans

no longer need fear the strong arm of the gument para competir en Cuba. There is a LOT of informacion on the Internets chock full of ideas, suggestions, and experience to guide anyone to a great Cuban experience. I personally used Tripadvisor and the Lonely Planet forums and from there found CubyJunky and so very, very much more.

So, inscripcion and travel arranged, the next decision is where to stay. The triathlon organization seemed mainly geared towards Europeans and provided a complete package with airport transport, hotel, flight, etc. I was told by a Canadian who did NOT use the package that he had spoken with some very unhappy triathletes who had. So something to be aware of for next year. Oh yeah, babay, Cuba be ON for next year! After all, I be La Campeona! There are some nice hotels in Habana but we were looking for a cultural experience and booked a casa particular where you stay with a local family. When, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Fidel opened up turismo en Cuba (1996?, the year of my 2nd born), families could apply accept turistas in their homes and these are the only local, legal way to stay with a Cuban family. We found a plethora of available homes and all very willing to host and care for their guests. Our particular duena de la casa en Habana felt a very personal need/obligation to ensure we were cared for and safe. She made travel arrangements, gave us advice on travel, food, entertainment and was really the one who made our trip such a great experience. She fed us and when I got sick not only cared for me, but cared for my girls as well.

So, yeah, it took me this long to get to the triathlon part, and if you haven't figured it out by now I'll just spell it out for you – this ain't gonna be quick. Did I mention the part about where I became La Campeona? Yeah. I know. Amazeballs. And even more amazeballs? I even kept my modesty and humble demeanor. I KNOW! I amaze MySelf sometimes. Guess it just comes with being La Campeona.

So it was pretty obvious from package pickup (the bags were supermarket bags) to the event itself (we didn't know the bike or run route until we were actually On the bike and run) that this was a first event. This was actually the very first long distance triathlon in the country and if you could get over the fact that you were going to be a little blind and have to figure stuff out on your own you were going to be fine. I brought both types of money with me (Cuba is reported to be phasing out one kind soon) and had stuffed my bike jersey with food, anticipating the need to purchase food/water during the bike. The swim was held in the marina (yeah, were all the boats dock) and while it sounded like polluted and gross water I was very surprised to experience no gas or diesel or oil fumes or taste or anything in the entire 4.2 km (oh, did I mention the course was long? Yeah, some people found that a teensy bit frustrating) course. By the time the event had rolled around the organization had added a half distance that started just before we, the full distance started.

So we cheered on the brave half distance racers into the freezing cold water. Now this might just be my Mexican side showing but the water was so very, very cold that the organization at the last minute (which literally must have been at the start because the smart triathletes brought wetsuits with them) to allow wetsuits. Unfortunately those of us swimming in tropical waters purposely avoid wetsuit-legal races because the idea of swimming in water that cold makes her brain go numb (yeah, that would be La Campeona we speak of). So la pobre Campeona before she was La Campeona was the Only person at

the start in a swimsuit. So being a bear of a little bit bigger brain than very little brain she added some shorts for warmth.

Almost the whole way, so spectator win there. Leave it to Cuba, however, to manage to put people out in the middle of the water to watch over us and make sure that we were going the right way. The swim course only changed a couple times but stayed true to one version so we had no excuse to get lost. We went out one marina finger, over through the opening to the sea to the opposite side, around some buoys and back a different marina finger. There were volunteers sitting on rafts, on marine buoys and on the seawall watching over us. When the water is that cold it is more than heartwarming to see the suffering volunteers in la madrugada (think time of day we were out there) freezing, trying to find a comfortable place on a marine buoy bobbing in the sea. That was something special. Plus they had a boat and a jet ski keeping tabs on us.

The swim sure felt long and by the last marina finger I was thinking the Cliff bar and espresso I'd had for breakfast had been, again, a little light. When 4 volunteers finally pulled me out of the water both hands were numb and I was not sure my forearms still existed but I was excited to see what next was in store – and since I was planning a full change of clothing I knew I'd be warm, at least. There was a changing tent only for las mujeres in this event. Sorry guys, I'm not sure what you guys did but I came to the start ready to both race in one outfit and change if able (since again information was not terribly available until we were in the event). As is my pattern I stripped to bare skin and was immediately enveloped with volunteers putting clothing on me and asking what to do. I'm sure they went home with tales to tell of the nudista who went on to become la campeona. There was one lady who was Very Focused on la crema. She must have asked me 15 times if I was ready for la crema. Considering I had forgotten la crema in my last Ironman (Cozumel) and would have paid dearly for any whisper of la crema and finally grabbed a handful of Vaseline after 1 lap of the bike, I was thankful for her dedication and ability to read my muddled mind to know exactly what I did not want to forget this time.

Before the event had started I was asking everyone I could if they knew the bike route (since the posted one had been an out and back along the autopista but somewhat circuitous throughout Habana) as I could not find a street by street routing through the city of la Habana. I knew the organization was going to take us through the important streets of the city but no map made available that I could find outlined exactly what streets we would take. Everyone I talked to (pretty much just the Mexicans) said "Eso es Cuba" and just don't worry about it; which I found utterly fascinating since whenever we're befuddled in the Ways of Mexico we (expats) just say TIM (This is Mexico) and that really explains it all.

Since I was just looking to finish I figured I'd just try to come out of the water in a group and follow the leader and that is exactly what happened. I ended up with 3 other Mexicans and completely contrary to all that is Ironman we rode 2 by 2 or 4 abreast throughout La Habana out to the autopista. And the whole way we could not have hoped to become lost because El Triatlón de Habana had arranged our side of the road to be closed AND the lane(s) we rode in were lined with human guards. In an impressive show of force, there were volunteers in neon green shirts, military in their green, and police in their blues lining the entire course throughout the city. It was one of the most amazing shows of solidarity or

unity I have ever seen. In order to get lost or leave the course you were going to have to drag un voluntario o militar o policia or two with you and seeing how seriously la duena of our casa particular took her job, I can imagine these guys weren't going to let you get far.

ampeona came onto the bike course in 3rd place. When there are only 3 women in the entire race, really all you have to do is finish the damn thing to be in the money, although here in Cuba no money would be changing hands, but La Campeona was really Very Interested in obtaining some art, so she was very happy to be finishing in the money, assuming she finished. Once on the autopista La Campeona managed to take 2nd place (La Mexicana) without much trouble but expected 2nd place to be sitting pretty close behind her. Unfortunately, la pobre Campeona's computadora was on the fritz and all she could see was heart rate and time. So allowing that there were hills in this country and La Campeona is from the flatlands of the Yucatan peninsula, she allowed her HR to sit a bit higher than in training but not too terribly high. She figured as long as her legs felt fresh she was doing okay.

And then La Campeona saw a moto ahead. She had seen a moto leading the men's leader and a moto leading the Cuban leader (3rd place overall as it turned out) but she still didn't realize that the moto was leading La Espanola (with whom she had chatted at length with at the start and personally really liked), in 1st place in the women (which again, only 3 were racing). Once the truth of the situation finally made it through the very thick skull (it was very cold for La Campeona as a frente frio had rolled in that day – for those who have been to Czoumel, think “norte”) she increased her effort (hey even with only 3 women in the race you make a pass like a pro, amirite?) and gave La Espanola a good cheer as she **TOOK FUCKING FIRST PLACE IN THE RACE** (again, only 3 women racing but **DAYUM** head exploding from the idea of **LEADING** a race, **AMIRITE?**).

And La Campeona was born.

Funny thing, when you're leading a race you get a moto escort.

Let's revisit that statement. I had a MOTO escorting me on the bike route of a triathlon. I could not believe my reality and dug my camera out of one of my 3 overstuffed jersey pockets and took a picture. Because I was sure this Would Not Last. There were 2 guys on the moto and they were cracking up at me- WTF was this NEWB doing? And I told them DUH, foto dudes – never in my LIFE imagined being here – and so we took a couple quick before La Espanola (2nd) or La Mexicana (3rd) kicked my old Murican ass, because Interwebs, La Campeona has a good 10-15 years (or more) on both those lovely ladies.

You know what else happens when you're sitting with a moto at your side (or behind you when they want to take a smoke or chat with some guys they see or another moto or hell, maybe ask the cows whatssup) or a bit ahead of you? **THEY GET YOU STUFF!** Unfortunately since Eso Es Cuba all we had available on course was water or water or sometimes the aid station would offer water and then as an alternative there was water. But Sometimes they could actually find water and then the moto would take that for me and When I Was Ready for (c'mon it isn't going to be Gatorade...it isn't going to be Heed...it's going to be) water, they would open the bottle and hand it to me! And then my head exploded with ego and I

asked if they could get bananas (because I worked out my food situation and realized I needed more than I was carrying) and THEY GOT ME BANANAS! And if I'd had the balls to ask them to peel them I'm sure they would have.

So down the course we headed and I narry stopped for an aid station (so many ways to cheat, aren't there you black-and-white STers...) and found out from my intrepid moto driver that the route would be out and back dos vueltas. And I settled in for the ride. I had no idea of the distance but I heard no complaints from the Mexicans after the event as to the distance so I think it was likely a fair 180 km. When it became clear to me that I was going to come into T2 in 1st place my only goal for the entire race was to do that so my husband and girls could see me come in, escorted by a moto, in 1st place. Of course he missed it. I pretty much completely ignored any pretense of control or moderation and rode the fuck out of my legs. I wanted to hold that moto tight and the idea of 1st place (yeah, only 3 women, but if you are being led by a moto in a race it will fuck with your mind like a drug) kept me burning match after match after match. And it was a glory I can't begin to describe. I honestly don't remember being tired, I don't remember pain, I don't remember wanting it over. Honestly I was a little ready for it to end, but knowing I'd be dropping to 2nd or 3rd in the run I didn't really want it to end. I gave a water bottle from the last Cozumel race to one of the guys on the moto and figured I had a while (blind to distance or where I was) on the roads of Habana heading to T2 driven to empty my legs by the cheering corps lining the streets and the headiness of 1st place. I think ST really needs a forum topic, "How to save your legs and not race your heart out when leading a race..."

And suddenly I was at T2. It seemed it had popped up from nowhere. Since T1 had a changing tent I assumed T2 would also. Um...Nope. Not even for La Campeona. Again, I was enveloped by a swarm of volunteers offering me gels, Gatorade, water, barras, WAIT A MINUTE! Gatorade? DUDE I LOVE YOU! Yes! Please sir, may I have another? And then off to the filthy bano trailed by mi esposo so I could change my cycling bibs to sassy run skirt. Hey, La Campeona wins both in time and style. On a recent trip to the US I had purchased a SOAS kit and wore the top for the run which allowed me to stuff the pockets with gels handed out by the volunteers in T2 and a few I'd brought from home. I had 2 bottles of coke and that was to serve as my nutrition on the run.

I looked around for my bike escort as we were supposed to be running the Habana Marathon route (yeah, let's all have a nice laugh at my naiveté as I actually expected the route to be the one we had been instructed on) but I saw nothing but other runners from the half headed in my direction and groups of locals and tourists along the malecon. About 12 km later I had the run route and number of laps figured out. It was a very simple route – a loop along the malecon but the number of loops I figured out from the time it took me to finish one and after ensuring I was actually doing the marathon route and not the half. I guess the organization figured it would be a lot easier to take both distances along the same short route that would be able to provide light after dark. In retrospect it was a very logical route. However, I wasn't the only athlete figuring out how many loops and the route of the run while doing the event. Eso es Cuba....

Normally I run 9 minutes and walk 1 minute. My fastest IM is under 13:30 but not too much. See, I'm really not La Campeona material. I don't know my times, I don't respect the

event, I waste myself holding 1st place just because I fell in love with the idea of a moto escort...it is laughable. BUT I have heart. I have raced a month after getting typhoid. I have raced a week after the Norovirus. I have raced an entire IM only being able to take on 1500 estimated calories and finished. I DNF'd my last IM and ended up with 3L of IV fluid in the med tent. I don't give up easily. But I've never run a stand-alone marathon and I have never run farther than 21km without stopping.

So I started with bargains. I would run a full hour. But after a bit I figured that really wasn't too much of a challenge as in the beginning of an IM run it feels relatively easy coming off the bike. So I negotiated a 2hour run with myself. I've been doing a number of 2hour runs between IMCOZ and Cuba so I was familiar with that. I was taking about 75 minutes a lap and after 2 laps my family figured out the run course was not La Habana Marathon run course. I was timing the distance between La Mexicana in 2nd and I and could see I was holding the lead so I negotiated run 3 laps. Run 3 laps was Really Fucking Hard and now I was doing 80 minutes/lap but I wasn't dying and I had my own nutrition (since all that was offered on course was, c'mon, all together now, WATER) so I painfully negotiated run 4 laps. That didn't go down easy but it was a much easier negotiation as I was La Campeona and very, very afraid of not being La Campeona. And then a new wrinkle had appeared.

On lap 1 I had noticed a new female competitor, numero 90. She looked pretty fresh and I assumed she was in the half but then I saw her on lap 3 and got very, very afraid. I knew she had not been on the bike and I wondered if she was trying to cheat her way into 1st in the full or if La Campeona had a royal fuck up along with the moto and she had been on the bike after all. It was driving me insane. How did she think she could get away with it? Was the organization in on it? Was Cuba as corrupt as another country which shall not be named but begins with an eme and ends with exico and try to slip una campeona cubana into the place of the rightful Campeona? It was enough to make a campeona cry. Or mad. Or really just very confused.

So La Campeona, because my dear ST, she is all that is una campeona, ran the entire fucking marathon. Well, except for a part on the 4th lap that lasted the length of El Hotel Nacional. And at the very last turnaround there were guys with walkie-talkies with tall antennas transmitting the fact that la Campeona had left the turnaround and La Campeona saw that little you-know-what that starts with una b and ends with puta and passed her like she was standing still and then picked up the pace because even when you're la campeona of only 4 women in a race you still make the pass with fuerza and then you make it stick. But it was still a very long run to the meta and again running scared that that jovencita (c'mon guys – she looked 18 at the oldest) would pass la pobre suffering vieja campeona, La Campeona continued running scared straight to the turn into the chute to the waiting esposo whom she asked "is there anyone behind me?" before stopping to bestow the kiss of Victoria. La Mexicana in 2nd place just came out and said, "hey chica! WTF? Where'd you come from?", got her answer and continued on tranquila. At the awards ceremony La Campeona said, "oye, Mexicana! WTF with that number 90? and then La Campeona did feel very estúpida...

And just like she had dreamed throughout the run but never ever imagined possible and never before had the audacity to dream of, there at the end of the chute was a real live

banner to prove yes! This was real. This was happening. This was the end of a full Ironman and this little 54 year old, still fat and MOP mom was going to become la verdadera Campeona and she raised her arms (only halfway because, old, ancient, hurting frozen arms) in glory and directly through the banner of campeones into the arms of the waiting medical staff. How caring, thought La Campeona. They are so concerned about me it is beautiful! And the cameras were on and recording her arrival and she could see press shooting away but the medical staff were incredibly attentive, almost glue-like. They stuck to La Campeona with a force. They kept asking her how she was and took her over to the massage tables for an ice massage. What a concept, eh, ST? Instead of massaging muscles, they were rubbing her legs with pieces of ice. If it had been warm it would have been amazing! Unfortunately, la pobre campeona had not been able to take on nutrition on lap 4 and was very, very nauseated and started dry heaving.

And then La campeona, who had broken a rib 2 weeks before the event and taken some Mexican pain medication oh yes, la nueva Campeona del triathlon La Habana was now headed for doping control. And los doctors would not leave her side until she gave her muestra.

I have never been to an awards ceremony outside our local Quintana Roo triathlons. I won my category in my first HIM in Veracruz but could never find the actual ceremony so we gave up and as such I was expecting something between what I have seen in pictures of a WTC IM event AG podium and our local events. I did not expect TV interviews. I did not expect countless press photographs. I did not expect a flag ceremony along with the Murican national anthem. ST, I choked up at the damn flag and anthem. I was awarded by one the Five Heroes. I had people ask to take their pictures with me. I was surrounded with fame I didn't even recognize, political to athletic. If you could take all the headiness of the Olympics and distill it and shower it over me it could not have matched the awe and delight I enjoyed at that presentation. I never dared to dream of a first and yeah, 1st of 3 women (numero 90 was a relay!) but still old lady in 55-59 PR'd by more than 30 minutes (still no clue of my official time but extrapolating from when I finally remembered to shut down my watch and on a long course – the run was rumored to be 45 km but I find that hard to believe). It was the realization of a dream I never knew existed.

And now I know I can run the entire run of a marathon in an IM. And that is almost as miraculous as becoming La Campeona. Because I have read on ST that if you run a 5-hr marathon, you're not really running. But I'm here to tell you, Honey, you might be right for the length of the Hotel Nacional and one other distance it took to fill my water bottle with water, but other than that, on the streets of Habana, baby, you're dead wrong. I raced that (what was most likely) a 5-plus-hour marathon. I raced with heart and fear and pain and I was out there probably a good 5 hours or more. And in retrospect, those were some of the finest 5 hours of my entire life.

Believe it or not, I left out a LOT. Feel free to ask away....

