

Race report

An extreme flow experience

Austria eXtreme Triathlon 2016



My core philosophy when it comes to training and racing is that it is crucial to find flow. Flow is defined as total presence and focus, where mind chatter (ie. worries and analytical thoughts) subsides and the perception of time changes. Flow is linked to optimal performance and helps me find the right level of effort and push myself a little bit extra while managing pain and fatigue.

Austria eXtreme gave me extreme doses of flow.

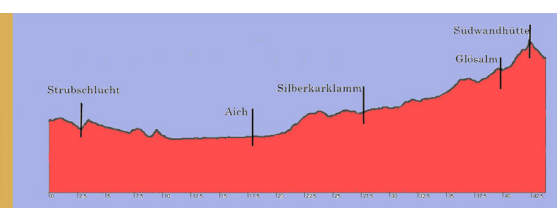
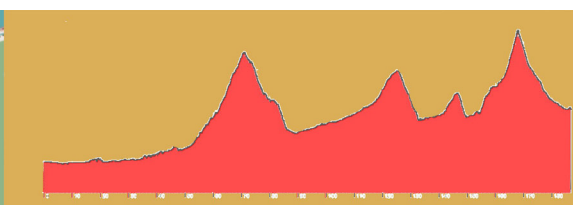
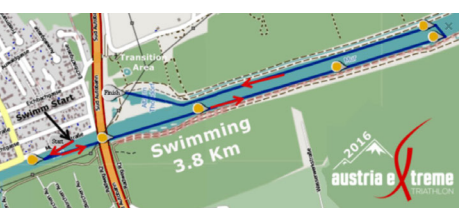
The swim: I had my best triathlon swim experience ever, found a good rhythm, avoided the "I'm going to die" feeling I usually get five minutes in when the oxygen debt is total. I also managed to avoid the bushes at the shoreline while swimming upstream.

The bike: I was almost alone on the road; it was 20 degrees (68 F) and no wind during the first relatively flat 30 kilometers and found a comfortable rhythm considerably below maximum effort (to save energy). After 50 km, I entered the first climb and began to wonder how I would manage this. But after a while I found a climbing rhythm. The key was to avoid looking forward/upward and instead I fixed my gaze on the road below or on the wheel of the bike in front and just kept going. The steep downhill pushed me into total presence and flow and they were fast, extremely fun (and a little scary).

The run: The start of the run after the bike was tough, but everyone around me adopted the same tactic: run when it's flat/downhill and walk uphill. It worked, I found a flow despite the fatigue and the fantastic scenery helped. Energy and fluid intake worked perfectly up to 27 km but then I should have eaten more at the check-point where my supporter (my son Måns) joined. Midway through the final 17 km I got really dizzy and tired - chocolate and gummy bears saved the situation. I wasn't completely exhausted at the finish line (only just), maybe I could have pushed harder last 17 km. But I had no time goal and didn't want to hit the wall.

Turn the page for the full report with details, lessons learned and conclusions.

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Austria eXtreme Triathlon

Background and facts

In Autumn 2015, I happened to find Austria Extreme Triathlon on the Web, after first surfing for information about Norseman and other Norwegian triathlons. The time to register for the lottery expired the same day. I entered and got a slot at this the second year of the race. Austria Extreme follows the same model as the Norseman, Celtman and Swissman. That is, they start at one place and finish at another, with a huge elevation gain and you need to provide your own support crew along the way as well as one supporter that must run/walk the last part and finish with you. It looked like an exciting challenge, not least because I like the mountains and especially the Alps. I've only done one full Ironman before, in Canada 2015. That race also had a big elevation gain on the bike so I thought it would be something similar (which it was not!).

125 competitors secured a slot in the race, 96 showed up to start and 71 crossed the finish line (including 5 women who all completed the race). 25 nations were represented.



Roadtrip and organisation

I recruited my sons, Måns (21) and Joar (20), as crew and supporters and as a bonus, we also enjoyed a week-long roadtrip through Europe. They really had to work hard during the long race day, which also became a test of brotherly cooperation skills. Austria Extreme is something completely different than triathlons arranged by the global Ironman brand. Almost the entire core of the Austria Extreme organization had the same last name, it was something of a family affair, and 100 participants instead of 2000, as is normal in Ironman-branded races, makes a big difference. The registration and briefing the day before the race was very well organized, the only problem was that it was 30 C (86F) outside and probably over 40 C (104F) in the room. Neither of my sons are high-mileage runners, although the two of them are training regularly. Ultimately we decided that Måns would be my supporter. An important aspect of this competition was that there was very little focus on time or position. The organizers' motto was that everyone who completes the race is a winner and this philosophy permeated the contest.





The swim

Start 04:30! What worried me most before the race was the early start. How would I be able to eat and get my body going so early? 02:45 coffee, sandwiches in the car on the way to the start, yes it worked. We were a bit slow getting going and had to park far away, which resulted in a moment of high stress levels, but we ultimately had plenty of time to fix everything. The swim in the river Mur was a one loop course with 2,000 m (1,25 miles) of the distance downstream and the rest against the current. The current was quite strong. There was plenty of space in the water with only 96 participants and I got a perfect turnaround at the first buoy and the swim down stream was pleasant. In all my previous triathlons I usually feel like I'm going to die after 5 minutes, due to the high speed at the start and I unconsciously hold my breath. This time I focused on the exhalation, held back a little on the pace and avoided the problem entirely. I also made a perfect turnaround at the next buoy where the upstream swim began.



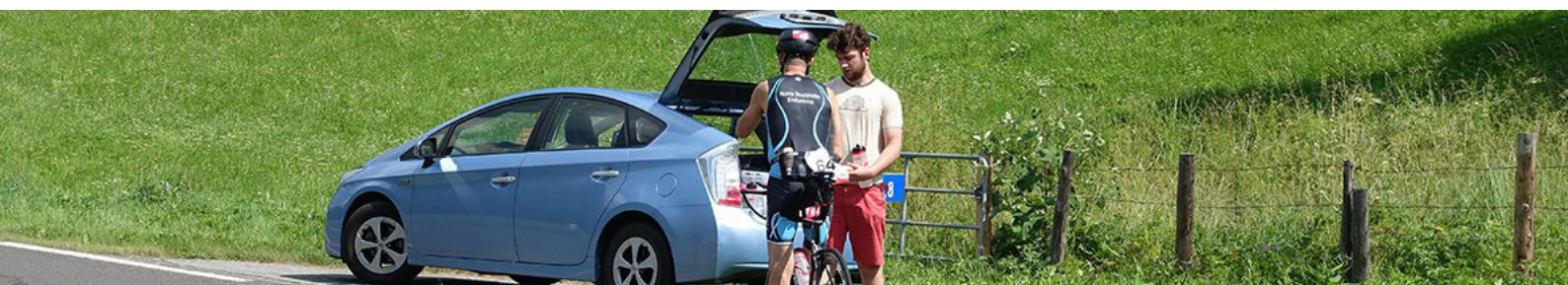
Swimming against the current is challenging. I have previously done some whitewater kayaking and learned that close to the riverbank there is a section where there will be a snare and a little less water flow. Further out, the water speeds up. The problem here was that shrubs and roots grew out into the water and created barriers closer to the riverbank. I handled most of the bushes without problems, but caught up with a group of swimmers simultaneously with branches that stopped us and it got a bit chaotic. With this being the only small challenge, I had overall a great swimming experience. To swim 04:30 in the morning was no problem at all. The fact that more than half the swim was downstream made the times fast. My time under an hour was well below what I thought I could do (the swim was the only part of the race that I had a decent track of how long it would take). The transition at T1 was fast, I had my tri suit under the wet suit, and started out on the bike with no one around. With 20 C (68F) in the air and no wind I was dry quickly.





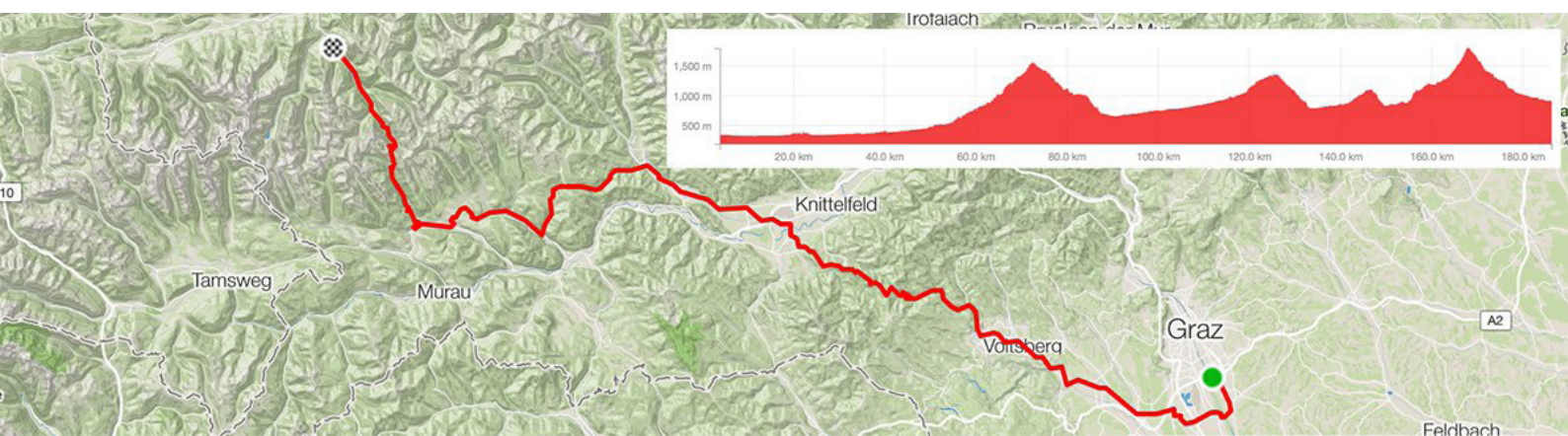
The bike - first part

Just before six in the morning, empty streets, sunshine and no wind. I got into a great flow on the first 30 km. My experience is that to find flow it is important not to stare too much or too often at your speed, heart rate or watt data. Instead trust your feelings and skip the numbers. After 30 km my flow session was broken by mind chatter in the form of worries about my support crew. Why hadn't they showed up yet? We had agreed that the first water stop would be at 45 km. It turned out that my sons had a discussion about how quickly they needed to get going from the starting area. Anyway, they managed to catch me at 40 km and I got my water. We decided that the next support stop would be at the top of the first climb, which proved to be too far in between, it took a lot of time to get up there. After that we decided that they would stop more often, that is, as soon as they had the opportunity. To get the support working was essential, not least when the temperature later reached 30 C.



Energy and hydration

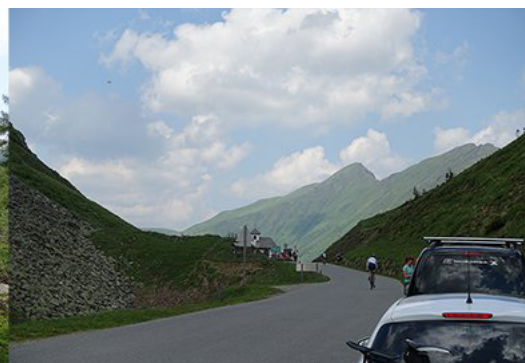
Getting the energy intake and hydration right is crucial for the Ironman distance and Austria Extreme offered an additional challenge as it would take much longer than a normal Ironman. I used my own gel throughout the race (the banana-lemon without coffee, recipe here: <http://flownow.se/tools.html>). It worked great, and I avoided the too sweet taste that some gels leave after long-term use. I added Powerbar PowerGel shots with cola flavor and caffeine. They are easy to ingest and give the extra caffeine needed. At each stop one of my sons handed me a handful of these gel shots. We also had prepared sandwiches with peanut butter and cream cheese, planned to be eaten on two occasions, but it didn't work. One lesson learned was: *Do not use rolls with melted cheese on top (cheese bread)*, they make your hands greasy and after eating a few bites of such a greasy sandwich at the first peak the high speed descent with oily hands got a little extra scary. Up to 27 km into the run (about 13 hours), the energy and fluid intake worked perfect. Then I should have stopped and eaten more, instead I ended up in an energydip and cola, chocolate and lots of gummy bears saved me.



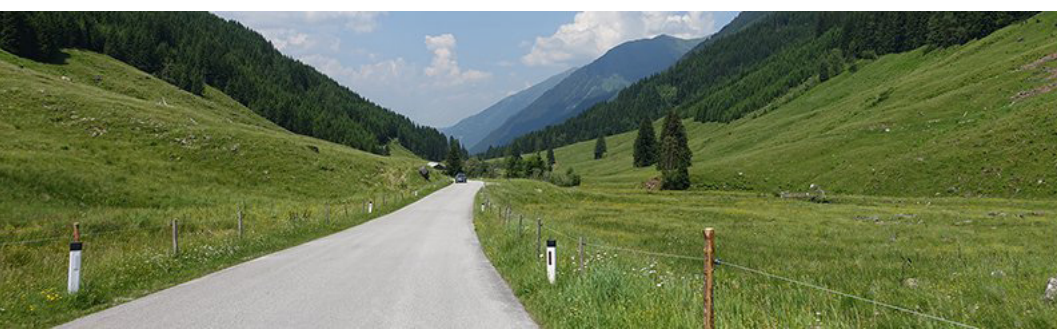


The bike - climbs and descents

After 50 km the first climb began and at first it was a shock. How will I manage this? My regular bike loops around Stockholm are flat and not the optimal way to prepare for the Alps. But I finally found a rhythm/flow. The key was to avoid looking forward/upward and instead I fixed my gaze on the road below or on the wheel of the bike in front and just kept going. **It became a total "be-here-and-now" exercise.** In addition I had to save energy; it was still a long day ahead. The climb also showcased the helpfulness that characterized the race. I had stopped just before the very last climb and when getting back onto my bike I could not get one of my shoes to clip into the pedal. Luckily I got a helpful push from the guy in the pink jersey, Daniel from Switzerland. *From the climbs I also learned that it's better to use a standard racing bike with clip-on aero bars instead of a tempo/tri bike. A regular bike is more comfortable on the climbs. It was also getting very hot and a regular airy helmet would be better than my Giro Air Attack.* After the first peak and following downhill there was a stretch between 90 and 110 K (56 and 68 miles) where I lost my focus and flow. I began to look at my GPS, started worrying and the kilometers ticked by slowly. But then new climbs and focus and flow was back.



After big climbs come big descents. Going down on a bike in the Alps requires complete presence, and flow follows. The descents get crazy fast, involve a certain amount of fear and in my case a lot of braking, especially since I knew nothing about the roads ahead. I was overtaken by several Alp accustomed participants who dared to keep a completely unimaginable speed. The long curving descents was also one of the greatest joy rides I've experienced on a bike. The top of Sölkpass, the highest point of the bike course at 1790 m (5900 ft), was reached after 168 km (104 miles). I made a short stop and put on a windbreaker (*in retrospect I should have stopped and eaten one or two sandwiches*). After the pass, we had 18 kilometer high speed downhill with a tailwind to the transition at T2. It would have been good to have food in the stomach during the long descent, but it anyhow gave much needed rest before the run. Sure, I was tired, but not exhausted, and I was in very good spirits after that crazy fast and fun descent.



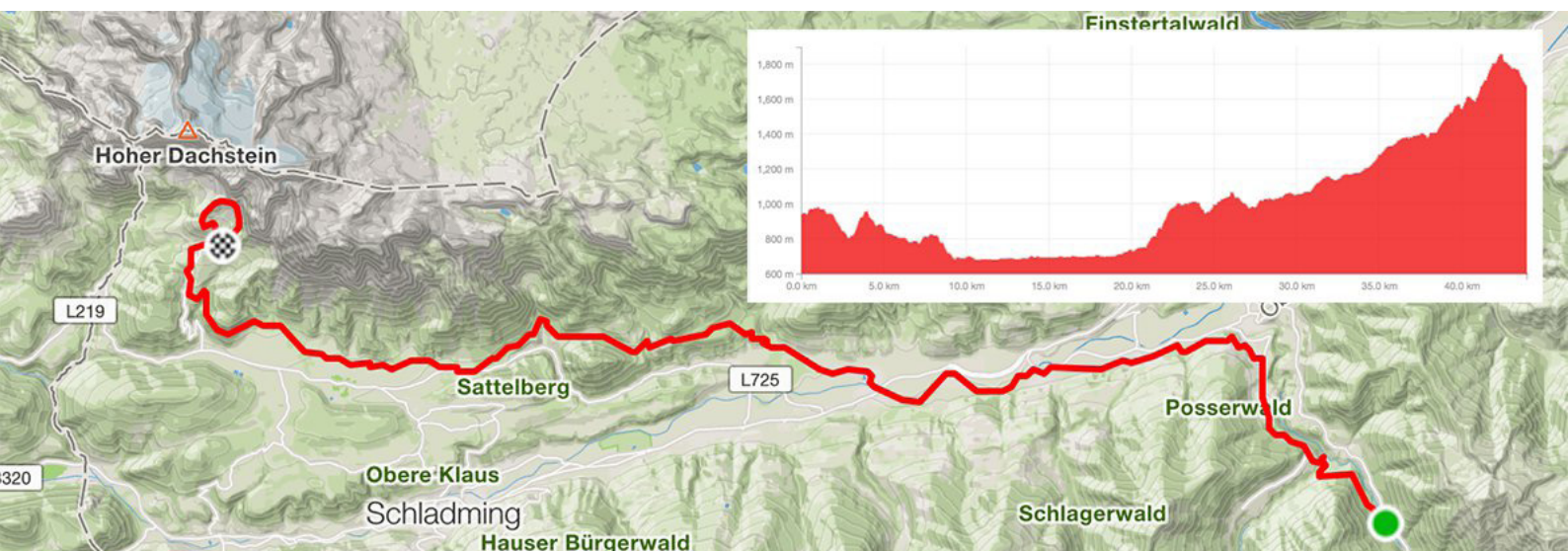


The run - first 27 km

The run was divided into a first part of 27 km (16,5 miles) where you ran on your own and a last part of 17 km (10,5 miles) where you had to run/walk with your supporter and carry backpacks containing emergency equipment, headlamps and extra energy. All participants had a hydration backpack during the entire run because it was quite far between the possibilities of getting support. I started out at the same time as the leading woman, Karla Oblak from Slovenia, but after a few kilometers I lost sight of her (she crossed the finish line 1.5 hours ahead of me). I hadn't a clue how long the run would take, so just had to take as it came. At first I checked the pace on my GPS a few times, but it was totally irrelevant, the variation was huge between downhill, flat and uphill. Everyone around me had the same tactics, run when it was flat or downhill and walk uphill. Eventually, the definition of what was considered an uphill got more generous. The energy for running uphill was nonexistent.



I found a rhythm alternating between running and walking; there was a flow in the middle of the general fatigue. After 21 km we reached the first big climb and the power in my legs going up was ok. The beautiful scenery helped to keep mood and energy levels up. The point to point race course treated us all the time with new stunning scenery. **In the midst of this incredible scenery, I experienced a very strong sense of presence, the impressions of everything around me were in "high definition" despite the tiredness.** The sharp climb at 21 K was followed by a flatter part, I was nevertheless walking more than running, but it felt good. I knew I had plenty of time, I thought it would be reasonable, even with a continued slow pace, to reach the finish line at 9 pm, three hours before the deadline. At 27 kilometers my Garmin watch died (the battery apparently only last 13 hours) but it did not matter. I primarily use the data from my watch to learn and evaluate afterwards. I was pretty alert when I arrived at the check-point where my son would join, but there I made a mistake.





The run/walk - the last 17 km

We walked/ran on almost instantly, *but I should have stopped, sat down a few minutes, eaten one or a couple of sandwiches and had a cup of coffee.* It wasn't much running on this final 17 km uphill. I lost momentum and we were passed by several participants. With about 7 km to go, I reached my absolute low point in the race, I felt dizzy and wobbly. A candy bar and fistfuls of Gummi Bears saved me, I got my blood sugar up again and proceeded to chew gummy bears during the rest of the route. **Up, up and more up, it was now all about taking one step at a time and not looking up the mountain. The same "be here and now" tactics as on the bike climbs.** It was nice to have company. It started to get dark and a rain hung in the air, but it was still a comfortable temperature and I felt quite refreshed when we reached the checkpoint at the highest point 1910 m (6270 ft) above sea level.



The last 2 km of the race was a descent in rocky terrain and over two snowfields. One team ran past us but we kept walking; I did not want to risk a fall in this final part. On the very last stretch we had to turn on our headlamps. We crossed the finish line after 17 hours and 4 minutes. Tired yes, but not completely exhausted. My first thought was that I should have been able to go faster on the last 17 km (or maybe not).





Award ceremony and photo by the glacier

On Sunday morning brunch was served and all 71 participants with supporters who crossed the finish line received a medal and finisher shirt. No finishing times were presented and the awards were not given in any particular order. After that, the winners were awarded; Joachim Hirtenfellner from Austria 12 hours 4 minutes and Karla Oblak from Slovenia 15 hours 31 minutes. After the brunch and awards ceremony everyone got to ride the cable car up to the Dachstein glacier for the finisher photo.

Flow - Austria Extreme gave me lots

I have never been in a race where I found and sustained the feeling of flow to this extent. The swim against the current, being alone on empty streets in the beginning of the bike ride, the climbs with total focus, the crazy fast descents and finally the run/walk in large parts alone immersed in breath taking surroundings. The experience of flow was powerful. Sure this kind of race is also a boost for the ego and a way to show that despite my age I can. Sure it's fun to check results and compare on Strava. But I belong to the category that put the medal and finisher shirt in a box. The ego boost part of competing as well as training is not the most important thing for me.

I'm primarily looking for flow. I want to access the total experience of presence. I want that feeling of being fully alive and seeing and experiencing the world in "high-definition". And Austria Extreme gave me lots of that.

Physically, I had almost no soreness directly after the race (it was much worse after Ironman Canada and even after my last Stockholm Marathon). I did however have a great weariness the week after, partly caused by lack of sleep associated with our travel home, but clearly also a general fatigue from the race. The toughest thing I've ever done? I don't know. My Ironman in Canada in lousy weather and with higher intensity was probably harder. The most rewarding/fun race I have done? Absolutely! And I couldn't have done it without my excellent supportcrew - my sons' Måns and Joar. I will definitely try to get a slot in Norseman, Swissman, Celtman (or Austria Extreme again).

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