

the 4th leg

BY KYLE DU FORD



The Best Race Ever

THAT IS, MY RACE: CATALINA ISLAND TRIATHLON, AVALON, CALIFORNIA. NOVEMBER 2000

SOME RACES HOLD significant lifetime memories: your fastest half-iron, the time you held 6:05s on the run, the race where you met your future spouse. But nothing will ever surpass your first race.

► CATALINA ISLAND TRIATHLON
AVALON, CA
NOVEMBER (DATE TBD)
(pacificsportsllc.com)

The snow had already started to fall for the winter in the Twin Cities when I boarded a plane the first week of November in 2000. As a support-raising para-church worker, I had little more to my name than enough for a plane ticket to Los Angeles, but I readied myself for the journey. After all, I had saved for this trip since May.

Upon landing I was greeted by an alumnus from my old fraternity's local chapter. A good 25 years my senior, he took it upon himself to teach me about this new amazing diet he had stumbled upon, the Atkins something or other. "As a triathlete, you need protein," he insisted. I nodded half out of respect, mostly out of naiveté.

I woke the next morning to down a pre-packaged container of instant oatmeal (I declined another steak offer) and hopped into a different friend's car bound for Long Beach, a good hour away. My race would

not be on the mainland but on the Catalina Island town of Avalon, so a trip to the ferry was in order. Unfortunately, my friend's schedule meant arriving early, leaving me to fend for myself for the six hours until my departure. I used a sliver of this time to pick up my rental bike.

The local bike kiosk stocked mostly what you'd expect to find in a beach town full of tourists—cruisers and mountain bikes—but I had reserved their one road bike weeks in advance.

The maroon Giant was glorious: a triple

chainring up front; all Shimano Ultegra groupo; big, flat pedals with toe-clips and heavy, 32-spoke wheels. The bar tape was so worn that if I held onto one area for too long, removing my palms from the bar was like removing a tongue from a licked steel pole in the dead of winter. But I didn't care. All I had back home was a Raleigh mountain bike.

I killed my remaining five and half hours in a local Starbucks and then pedaled the three miles over the "no bikes allowed" bridge to a waiting passenger ferry. I had purchased my super-expensive round-trip ticket to Catalina online two months earlier, but I still had to swallow a few times to accept the price printed on my ticket. All this for a marathon across the water?

The ship was full of thin, in-shape individuals standing near their Kestrels, Quintana Roos and Treks. All of them had fancy bars pointing from their handlebars that were covered with neatly patterned cork tape and shifters at the ends. I eyed my maroon beast, sheepishly hiding in the corner. "What, mine? Yeah, but my *real* bike is in the shop."

On the island was a small speedboat waiting to shepherd me to yet another location, a small camp owned by the group I worked for. The boat, I later learned, was the only way to get there. I locked my steed to a lamppost in town and climbed aboard.

At the next morning's start—a reasonable 9 a.m.—I was scared shitless. Wearing my anxiety like my O'Neill (surfing) wetsuit, I lined up in my wave for the 850-yard swim around the Avalon Pier. Three days' travel to get here. I was ready. I thought.

The 10-mile, three-lap bike course took me over tough Mt. Ada, where I quickly learned my derailleur was stuck in the middle chainring up front and only the middle four of my nine cogs in the rear would accept my rusty, never-tuned chain. Lovely.

By the run I was exhausted but pushed myself past the local golf course before turning around and heading back to town. I heard my name from a few hundred yards away, sprinted to the line then quickly keeled over and dry-heaved for 20 minutes.

Though I finished in the top 25 percent of my age group (my goal was the all-too-common newbie credo "not to finish last"), I have gone on to have better races with faster times that took less than a mortgage to get to the starting line. But this was The Best Race Ever, at least for me. Dry-heaves, sticky bar tape and stuck gears or not, I can never have another first race. ■