

Competing in the Duathlon World Championships

By Darcy LaDue-Vargas

Multisport events, including duathlons and triathlons, continue to grow in popularity. According to USA Triathlon, the national governing body with 100,000-plus members, multisport is one of the fastest growing sports in the world. What drives these athletes to train for one, two, and often three sports at once? These are competitors to the core and multisport is an important part of who they are.

Becoming a multisport athlete is quite an achievement, but being part of Team USA and competing against the world's best takes that achievement to the next level. USA Triathlon sanctions qualifying events around the country; you must "qualify" to compete at the World Duathlon Championships. The 216 athletes representing the United States on Team USA competed in a regional qualifier and earned their opportunity to race at Worlds. Over 900 of the world's best duathletes competed in the 2008 International Triathlon Union (ITU) Short Course Duathlon World Championships in Rimini, Italy.

The three-day World event featured a 10K run, 40K bike, and a 5K run. Race day conditions were cool and rainy in the morning. The temperature warmed to the 70s and the course was dry for the afternoon races. Athletes traversed a mostly flat run course that featured 25 turns and four laps over the first 10K. The six-lap bike course was also flat and the race finished with a two-lap 5K run. The course was very spectator-friendly and picturesque as it wound along the beachfront streets of the Adriatic Sea.

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Vargas Posts Best Career Finish at Worlds

Troy Vargas, D.P.M., a foot and ankle surgeon with St. Croix Orthopaedics, Stillwater, MN, posted his best-ever career finish at Worlds. This was his third time competing on Team USA. He also



competed in the 2002 Duathlon World Championships in Austria and the 2003 Duathlon World Championships in Switzerland. He spent most of the 2008 season training for the Colorado Relay and the Ragnar Relay Great River, with the culmination of his season in Rimini. "I feel honored to represent the USA at the World Duathlon Championships," commented Dr. Vargas. "Competing against the world's best athletes is an exhilarating experience and makes all the hard days of training worth it." Dr. Vargas was the 12th best US men's finisher with a time of 2:10:23.

Vargas is a duathlete and avid runner. He doesn't remember a time in his life when he didn't run. A track and field scholarship brought him from Moriarty, New Mexico, to Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. "I was from a small town in New Mexico, so the Midwest climate and culture was very different for me," he recalled. After a successful collegiate running career, Vargas decided to pursue medicine at the University of Osteopathic Medicine and Health Sciences – College of Podiatric Medicine and Sur-



gery, also in Des Moines. “I had several stress fractures that kept me sidelined, and I wanted to pursue a career that would enable me to help athletes like myself.”

His surgical residency at Hennepin County Medical Center brought Dr. Vargas and his wife, Darcy, to Minneapolis in 1996. The long Minnesota winters forced Vargas to find other avenues to train and he found a new passion for cycling and multisport. “It takes years to build up a good bicycling base and I’m still learning and growing in the sport. What I love about multisport is that it takes some stress off my aging joints and still allows me to continue with my first love, which is obviously running.”

Dr. Vargas’ love for running has never been more evident. He captained a team for the Colorado Relay in both 2007 and 2008. The Colorado Relay is a 24-hour 174-mile team relay race. In 2008, his 10-person team finished 2nd overall and won their division in a time of 21 hours, 48 minutes, 59 seconds. The team ran in all sorts of conditions, including rain, sleet, snow, and wind gusts, and covered terrain ranging

from paved bike paths to single-track hiking trails with rocks and branches covering the path. They also crossed four mountain passes with elevations reaching nearly 12,000 feet. Over half of the race was run in the dark of night with headlamps as their only source of light. Vargas completed this race just two weeks prior to Worlds and credits his training for the Colorado Relay for getting him into top shape. “Both the Colorado Relay and Ragnar Relay Great River really prepared me for the rigors of Worlds. I was pleased to have my best career finish at Worlds and am excited for next season.”

“My third trip to Worlds was an amazing experience,” Vargas remembered fondly. “The friendships you form with team members, the intense physical demands of the race, and the culture of Italy all combined to make this an extraordinary competition. I was fortunate to have my wife accompany me on this trip. It was her first time at Worlds and I was so glad she was there to experience it with me. I hope to qualify again and introduce my two young sons to the thrill of Worlds.”

The Veteran Athlete

Competing against the world's best as you represent your nation is certainly not a new experience for Dan "Rino" Rindfleisch. Rindfleisch competed in his 14th consecutive World Championship in Rimini. He's been a member of Team USA every year since 1995, and is currently third in the world for the longest streak of world championships. Only Mike McCarty from Massachusetts and a female competitor from Canada have raced in more consecutive world championships. A real estate agent from Madison, WI, Rindfleisch has had three podium finishes—gold in 1999 in North Carolina, bronze in 2000 in Calais, France, and silver in 2001 in Rimini, Italy.

Rindfleisch got into multisport in 1990 after a successful running career which included a 2:18 marathon, which he deems his most proud sports achievement. "Being a competitive person drives me to try to do well, in spite of my age, especially with those in my age group," described the 54-year-old competitor.

"What I enjoy about being on Team USA is seeing familiar faces returning year after year, getting to meet new team members, and seeing their excitement in preparing for and competing in the race for Team USA. It's also a pleasure to meet other country's athletes, and see other countries worldwide." Rindfleisch has raced in twelve different countries during his Team USA career.

In spite of over 50 marathons, countless road races, bike races, triathlons, and duathlons, Rindfleisch said he's been fortunate in not having too many "aches and pains" above the ankles. He explained, "My sports injuries have always involved my feet. I broke my big right toe the night before Worlds in Switzerland in 2003, and then I competed in Wisconsin Ironman the very next week. I've also broken several other toes in recent years, frequently sprained my ankles, and suffered from pain on the bottom of my feet on long

runs. I'm far from being the model specimen for a pain-free body. Many times I remind myself - 'that which doesn't kill you, makes you stronger!'" The veteran is already planning for next year's Worlds and his 8th Wisconsin Ironman.

Training to Compete

A two-time Ironman finisher, Todd Firebaugh, from Woodbury, MN, had his first experience on Team USA in Rimini. "The camaraderie you feel with fellow Team USA athletes was amazing," explained Firebaugh. "With a delegation of over 200 athletes, there was never a spot on the running course that you didn't hear someone cheering 'Go USA!' That gave me an extra lift."

Firebaugh's training regime for Rimini included commuting by bicycle 24 miles each way from Woodbury to downtown Minneapolis where he works. Firebaugh placed 6th in his age division, 45-49 year olds, and was the 6th best US men's finisher with a time of 2:07:43.

"I'm inspired by others who are faster than I am. Regardless of my age," Firebaugh said. "I believe I can continue to improve and get faster. Personal fulfillment is a huge component for me and these races are really about pushing yourself to your potential. To finish 6th in my age division and only 52 seconds behind the bronze medalist has pumped me up for my off-season training."

Training for multisport athletes is year round and Firebaugh is no exception. "My season was particularly long this year because I trained through the winter for the Boston Marathon in April. The human body is a wonderful organism with incredible recuperative powers – if you treat it right. I've learned when to back off the intensity or volume and when to rest, to enable the healing powers to work. I entered Worlds in Rimini feeling as healthy as I had all year."

Finishing at Worlds

Derick Podratz of Lino Lakes, MN, overcame a great deal of adversity on race day to finish his first Worlds. Coming out of transition on the bicycle, his front tire went flat. The rules of multisport don't allow anyone to help with mechanical issues, so Podratz had no choice but to fix his flat tire on the course. After a 9 minute delay, he was ready to attack the bike course. On the second lap of the bike, he crashed coming around one of the corners. "After I flatted on the bike, I said to myself, 'I am going to finish this race.' I picked myself up off the pavement, brushed off the blood, and just kept going," said Podratz. His finishing time of 2:30:38 was not what he was hoping for, but Podratz demonstrated the drive that is deep within athletes of this caliber.

"For as long as I can remember, I've always loved to compete," Podratz explained. "If it wasn't for competitive racing, I probably wouldn't exercise much. I train so I can compete for a win in my age group or even win overall at some races. I know that some people compete for the fun of it (which I definitely have fun), but I'm really out there for the competition and to get to know people that I consistently compete against."

Although Podratz endured hardship during his race in Italy, he still raves about the overall experience. "My first time on Team USA was fantastic! I met a lot of great people and made some new friends. Racing against athletes from so many different countries was quite the eye opener for someone who's only done one race outside of Minnesota.

"What I enjoyed most about being on Team USA was the camaraderie that I felt with all of the fellow American athletes. It seemed that everywhere I went there was someone in Team USA uniforms." □

For more information go to www.duathlon.it. To find out more about Team USA, go to www.usatriathlon.org.