

SCANDINAVIAN

THE **KMD CHALLENGE COPENHAGEN** PUTS TRIATHLON ON THE MAP IN DENMARK.

By Susan Grant-Legacki

Pedaling furiously down Hans Christian Andersens Boulevard in Copenhagen, my mind could not pry itself away from one thought: tacos. There are roughly a half dozen Mexican restaurants in the greater Copenhagen area, but I had been sent on the most particular of Hispanic culinary pilgrimages. Inside my backpack and carefully wrapped in bubble wrap rested two bottles of authentic Mexican hot sauce. I had been ordered by a friend back in San Diego to deliver these to Taco Shop #1 on Nyelandsvej (not to be confused with taco shops #2 and #3).

Apparently authentic taco sauce is hard to come by in Denmark, and I had been promised a taco for my trouble. Since I had a fantastic loaner bike at my disposal and I was in a country where commuting by bike was, as Danish Ironman legend Torbjørn Sindballe put it, "as natural as breathing," I saddled up and hit the streets of Copenhagen. An hour into what was supposed to have been no more than a five-mile delivery, I found myself staring blankly at a road sign. A kind passerby had advised me earlier that I needed to make a left over a bridge when I saw the tall circle spire of a church. Well, castle-like circle spires, churches and bridges are about as common in Scandinavia as pizza joints in New York City, and I found myself sinking further and further into that weepy, juvenile state I fall into when I'm hungry or lost. I really, really needed a taco.

I pulled out my map and looked for Rådhuspladsen, which is the city center and town square of Copenhagen. If I could make it there, I reasoned, I could probably at the very least get some more exact directions. I climbed up and over a bridge, but as I approached the town square I quickly noticed a familiar sign hanging off one of a dozen large white tents: "SPECIALIZED BICYCLES." I pedaled closer and saw more and more of them: "SCOTT," "BLUESEVENTY," "SRAM." I had stumbled upon KMD Challenge Copenhagen's triathlon expo right there in the busiest part of the city.



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When I was told that there was a large triathlon expo in downtown Copenhagen, I have to admit I figured “downtown” meant “off to the side and out of the way, so as not to annoy locals or tourists.” But here it was, in the absolute center of everything, not unlike setting up an expo in Times Square. “We asked the city for everything with this race: to pass by the Little Mermaid statue on the bike course, to have our expo at the city center and even to have our finish line at the city’s beautiful Christiansborg Palace,” says Challenge Family CEO Felix Walchshöfer. “We thought we would maybe get one of those things, but after we were done with our presentation to the city officials they were like, ‘Yeah, that all sounds good.’”

The placement of the expo is highly symbolic of the popularity of triathlon in Denmark, which over the last five years has seen astonishing growth in their age-group participation numbers. The reasons for this come down to the culture’s natural affinity for outdoor activity, a strong national triathlon federation and a signature event in the iron-distance Challenge Copenhagen that has been just as warmly embraced by city of-

ficials as it has been with spectators and competitors. The inaugural event in 2010 managed to be the largest sporting event of the year for the nation’s capital, with 1,600 participants and more than 125,000 spectators. This year more than 2,000 people started the race, and the same crowd numbers flooded the run leg’s four-loop course through downtown. With more than 64 triathlon clubs nationwide—not too shabby for a country with only 5.5 million people—and more triathlons on the country’s calendar every year, it’s clear that this Viking land is indeed having a triathlon awakening.

Denmark has long been known for its triathlon “über-bikers,” including Sindballe and ITU standout turned Ironman contender Rasmus Henning. These sport ambassadors, coupled with triathlon’s emergence as an Olympic sport and its incredible popularity in neighboring countries like Germany, put multisport on the map in Denmark over the last decade. The very recent surge in age-group participation is something else altogether, however.

“Everyone here in Denmark is getting into triathlon; it’s the hot new thing,” says Casper

Barfoed, an executive at the Danish biotech company Novozymes. Barfoed entered his first triathlon in 2010 as part of a company-wide team-building exercise led by the Denmark-based performance coaching company Running26, which includes Sindballe as one of its head coaches. Now, almost two years into his triathlon addiction, Barfoed came out to cheer on some friends at Challenge Copenhagen, and he’s busy planning a destination race sometime in the early spring with his coworkers. “This sport just really fits in here, I mean obviously it must since the entire city shuts down for this race and honestly no one minds at all.”

Even a few years ago, this might not have been the case. Back in 2007, when current Danish Triathlon Federation president Anna Karin Klærke was elected member of the executive board, triathlon had not quite found its footing. “We looked at many of the big triathlon nations like Germany, the U.K. and the U.S. and asked ourselves why they had the success they had and why Danes still weren’t so keen on the sport,” says Klærke. By the time Klærke was elected federation president in 2008, her



team was hard at work hiring more personnel to focus on age-group recruitment, marketing plans and youth development programs like Tri4fun, which introduces triathlon to Danish children in school. Next year, the federation is considering rolling out a national team of age-group athletes that will travel and compete internationally, simultaneously promoting their country and the sport. Even Klærke admits that what really put the sport on the map in Denmark was Challenge Copenhagen. "After that first race last year, we immediately noticed an expanded interest in triathlon; we had an increase in memberships and several new triathlon clubs popped up," she says. "We were quite surprised that it was in fact a long-distance race that attracted so many rookies to the sport, but it really kick-started our success among all other race distances."

The uptick of triathletes was also noticed by one of the more esteemed bike shops in Copenhagen, Byman Cykler, whose owners Mark Johnsen and Dan Gissel leased out the store next door in 2007 and turned it into one of

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the city's only triathlon stores, Byman Sport. "It's really been in the past couple of years that I've noticed more and more triathletes coming in the store, and just more triathlon bikes around the city too," says Kenneth Groendahl, who has worked at Byman Sport since 2008. "Marathons have been huge here for a long time, and I think this race came around at a time when a lot of athletes here were ready to take on a new challenge."

While it was probably only a matter of time before triathlon fever struck in Denmark, says Henning, who started out in Olympic-style racing but has since ventured over to long-distance events, the Challenge brand brings along with it a caliber of event people stood up and took notice of. "Challenge was the catalyst for triathlon in Denmark," Henning says. "A lot of people came out there and did this distance last year and realized it was doable, and others who watched them do it are now trying it for themselves this year."

The Challenge course was such that anyone in the Copenhagen area would be hard-pressed not to notice that something big was going on. The morning started with a chilly swim at the popular Amager Beach, a bike course that took athletes through the city and along miles and miles of rolling country roads, complete with grass-thatched roofs, lavender fields and windmills, and finished with a multi-lap run past a hundred thousand spectators and every major tourist sight in the downtown area. One family living on the outskirts of the bike course set up a long wooden dining table on the side of the road and laid out



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an elaborate spread of scones, cupcakes and tea sandwiches for any hungry athletes looking for a break.

"Making triathlon such a commercial event is what broke the barrier for it here," says Sindballe. While many sport programs in Denmark have relied on non-profit organizations for support and event management, Sindballe says his home country has been seeing a new branch of sports that combine corporate sponsorship with volunteers. "Challenge is a really successful example of that. There are now so many more options for people who want to sign up for a race or get a training plan, so many more so than there were even five years ago."

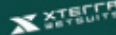
There's a reason such a small country has produced so many top-tier cyclists: This place was built to ride a bike. Whether you're looking to just cruise through the city or venture a little farther out to rolling country roads, you'll notice one thing right away—bike lanes that aren't just white lines separating you from a semitrailer, but actual divided lanes that sit between the road and the sidewalk, complete with their own traffic light system. As a result, more than 35 percent of people living in the greater Copenhagen area commute to work by bike, and that number rises to 55 percent inside the city proper. You'll see anything and everything on two wheels while in Denmark: dogs carried in front baskets, groceries and small pieces of furniture strapped on bike panniers—and of course the "Copenhagen Minivan," a large basket with seats inside placed on the front of bikes where children sit while their parents pedal them around.

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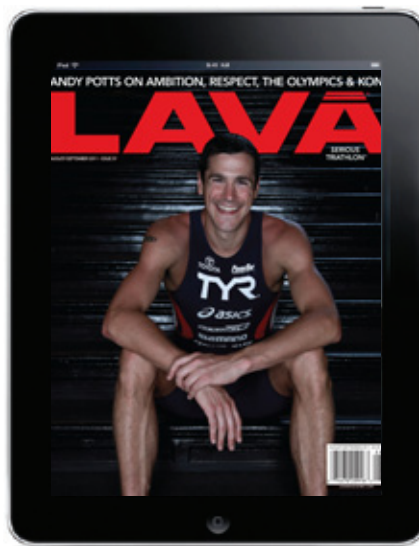


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Even with the city's less than ideal winter weather, people still choose bikes over cars. "When it snows, they clear out the bike lanes right away. I mean, it's cold and dark but it's also such a beautiful city in the winter that people still love to enjoy the outdoors," says Angus Edmond, a New Zealand native who moved to Copenhagen for the riding and now owns a bike shop.

Edmond agreed to take me out on one of the area's more popular road routes—known simply as "The Bull." There aren't really any serious climbs in Denmark. Local riders will tell you that if you want hill work you'll have to ride to Sweden, but the bull route offers enough heart-bursting rollers and windy back country roads to satisfy any serious rider. We rode past lush forest, golden wheat fields and villages cut straight out of a Hans Christian Andersen storybook. After returning to Edmond's shop and grabbing my backpack, I decided to give the hot sauce delivery I had abandoned the day before another try—this time I was successful. I handed over the goods, procured my payment in the form of two chicken tacos, and plopped down on the outside patio to enjoy the fruits of my labor. A man who looked to be in his early 40s pulled up at the shop on a fancy tri-rig, and took a moment to check out my ride. "Is that your Specialized?" he asked. "Well, sort of," I replied. "I'm borrowing it for a little while." He started to go in but then paused and turned back to me. "Are you here for the race this weekend?" he asked. I nodded. "Yeah, I'm doing it," he said, puffing out his chest a little. "It's gonna be coooool." **A**

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