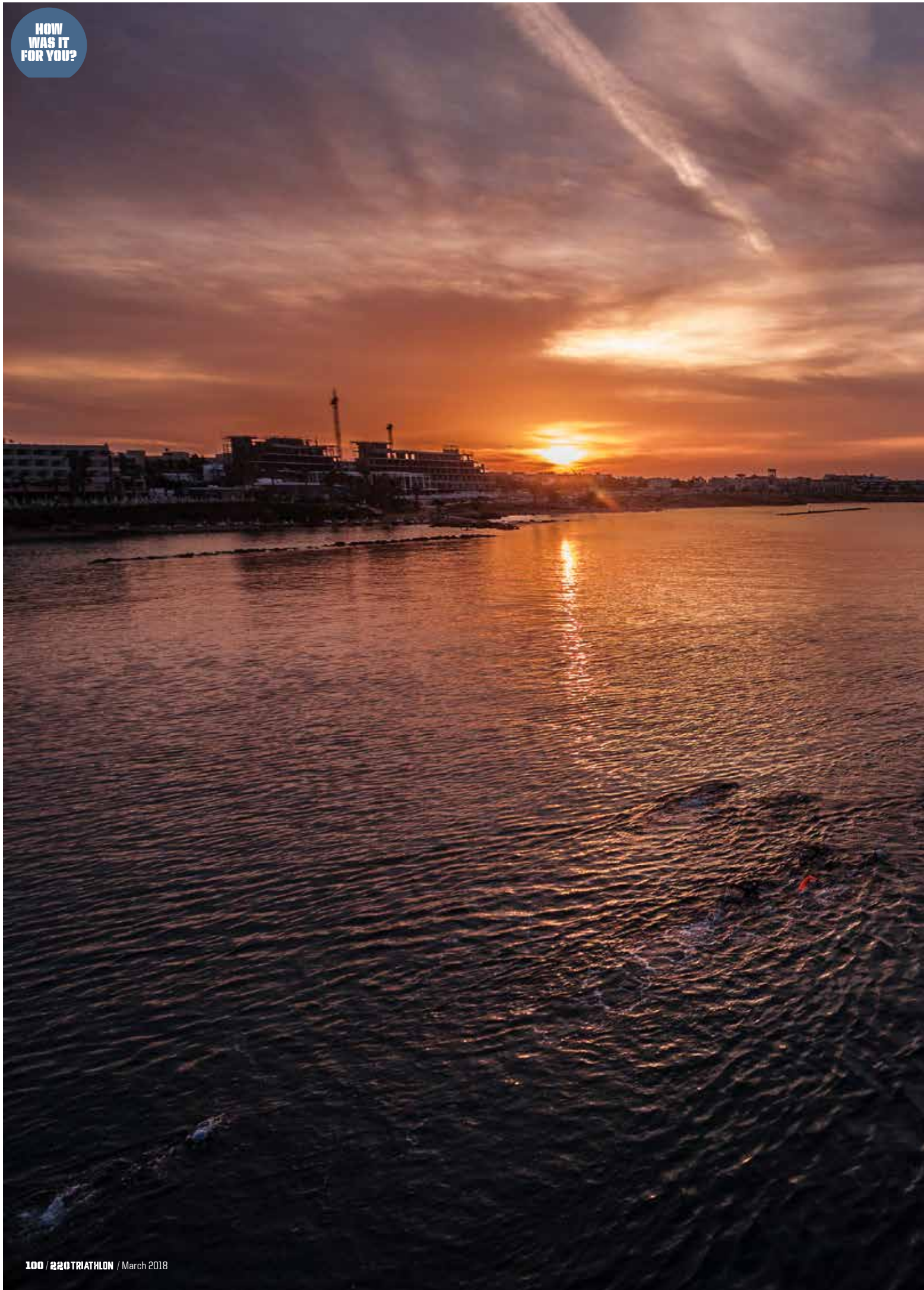


HOW  
WAS IT  
FOR YOU?



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# RACE TO OLYMPUS

*Want to find the ultimate season-extending race? Read on as a brave Scot takes an odyssey to Cyprus for the Olympusman middle-distance race that sees competitors scale 'the other' Mount Olympus...*

WORDS SEAN MCFARLANE IMAGES HARIS KAITIS

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he smooth, wide and empty tarmac now starts to rise properly. After the initial rolling, gentle climbs, the infamous ascending that's such a feature of this race begins. My legs shake at the prospect as I inch further and further away from sea level. Swimming in that same sea just a few hours ago was glorious but now I can feel the dried salt from the opening 1.9km leg in the Mediterranean all over my face.

So here we go, about 60 or so climb-filled kilometres lie before me. I'm not even thinking about the run that comes afterwards, spectacular as it may be with its finish at the summit of Mount Olympus, the highest point in Cyprus at an elevation of almost 2,000m. As of now, I'm in the heart of a unique triathlon challenge in the most perfect of weather conditions. It's late November yet I'm still in Europe. This is the Olympusman in southwestern Cyprus. And it's a race like no other.

### A BRIGHT IDEA

Olympusman is the brainchild of Mike Hadjoannou. Organiser of races such as the successful and long-running Cyprus Sunshine Cup, a mountain bike stage race that attracts the world's elite, he undoubtedly knows what he's doing. His experience certainly provides a welcome dose of comfort to this hugely challenging event. Keen to replicate a so-called 'extreme triathlon', such as the Norseman and Celtman, he duly went about creating the Olympusman. A passionate Cypriot, he was keen to make use of his country's stunning combination of landscape and climate as a backdrop to this special multisport event.

It's a race that starts with a 1.9km swim in the Mediterranean and is followed by an 86km bike that takes you into the Troodos mountains. There's a daunting 2,400m of climbing to get through on the second leg before the race's grand finale: a 21km run up to the peak of Mount Olympus.

The inaugural Olympusman was held in 2015 and I'm one of only two competitors to have done it every year. The other is local man Orestes Savva. He epitomises what the



event is all about. His face appears eternally frozen in enthusiasm, with the whites of his constantly wide-open eyes perfectly contrasting with his dark olive skin. Seeing him and his infectious energy at T1 is a great way to start race day. He's so proud that his country can host such an event and show off its natural assets to the world. And it's not difficult to see why, as those far less fortunate than the two of us endure the freezing conditions back in the UK and try to muster up some far-too-early festive cheer.

### A CHANGE OF PACE

Arriving in Pafos a few days before the race, the leisurely pace all around is at stark odds with what I'm here to do. Eruptions of white hair just about manage to break the horizon of reddened bellies on sun loungers as my wife and I walk along the beachfront during our rare moments of respite.

Registration is at the luxurious Almyra Hotel, which for reasons of minimum hassle, is where I'm staying. It's a stone's throw from the swim start and T1, but a galaxy away from Friday-night camping and midgies. I love Blightly but waking up to blue skies and warm air after a good evening spent eating halloumi and other nice things is hard to beat. Also with its relaxing spa, the Almyra Hotel offers a welcome escape for my other half (no need to cash in the brownie points for this trip).

The race begins at 6.30am in Pafos Harbour. It's impossible not to notice the assembled onlookers as I head down the steps into the water and swim towards the dead water start. They're a strange bunch: support crews, reluctant partners pretending to be happy to be up at this hour and early-rising tourists. Two laps of the flat, calm course follow. It's the warmest swim of the year for me, by quite some margin, and marks the beginning of a day of unrivalled memories.

It's such a nice experience to arrive at the first transition of an



### OUR MAN IN CYPRUS

Sean McFarlane was runner-up in the inaugural Celtman, City to Summit and Brutal extreme triathlons. He now runs This Way Up Media, a film-production company, and Athletico Management with BBC TV presenter and Deacon Blue drummer Dougie Vipond and the photographer Andy McCandlish.





extreme tri without shivering. I feel virtually naked as I put on minimal bike kit and head off following the clear road markings.

### HERE WE GO...

After 20km on a decent road with a few cars, I turn inland and begin to climb. Here we go... Or not, as shortly I'm descending back down into the valley. As I push on through the lush landscape, citrus smells are everywhere. Oranges and lemons hang on seemingly every tree. The area's olives trees refuse to be outdone, though, and have a good showing too. And is that pomegranate? It's a distinctive and ever-changing landscape, which proves to be a useful distraction for the fast-approaching climbs.

The road surface is perfect as I overtake a guy in full TT set-up. Not sure that's a wise choice. It's okay for now but with all that climbing still to come... Then, suddenly, the chalky clay hillside up ahead is exposed and I see the tell-tale roadside barriers up above me. Here we go, definitely this time. I'm 39km into the bike leg and still only at 250m above sea level. The rest of the ride has four distinct phases, the first of which is a solid 8km climb up to 800m. I see other riders stretched out ahead and use them as targets. My fellow Scot Drew Sharkey is up ahead too. He's a bit of a brick in the water, but he's battering through the field on the bike - his 63kg body loves this stuff, while I'm beginning to regret last night's dessert and, come to think of it, the last 30 or so years of them.

The next section provides a brief respite as I traverse the hillside.

Across the valley, idyllic settlements come into view, seemingly thrown randomly into small pockets in the distant hilly and forested countryside. The temperature drops slightly and the cooling is welcome.

After the second aid station there is, of course, another climb, but this time it follows a steadily rising, sawtooth profile. There are several chances to recover as the road rises before briefly falling again. I reach Andrea Djiakouris, a well-known local ultra-runner and someone I need to be well ahead of by T2. You can smell the pine trees on the air and their perfume reminds me of the Cairngorms. Flickering between a grin and a grimace, I spin onwards and upwards.

### THE FINAL CLIMB

All too soon, though, the descents disappear. At the final aid station in Prodomos my legs are seriously struggling. I try to remind myself that everyone will be struggling by now but the pain seems all too personal at this point. The final climb is all about energy conservation, somehow, but to quote an overused phrase, there really is no hiding place.

I crawl up to an altitude of 1,600m but the final 3km of the bike leg provides far too little time to spin out my legs. Yet somehow, even in my energy-depleted state, it's impossible not to notice what a special place this is. I'm in the heart of the Troodos Mountains at the base of ski towns and it's quite something.

The feeling in T2 is unique. I've made it to plenty in the past, but at

### TACKLE OLYMPUS

**1** Learn to climb as efficiently as possible on the bike, and how to follow it up with a good run. Most of us don't spin enough, so see what works best for you.

**2** Look at the profile of the bike course and split it up into more manageable sections. Tape the profile to your top tube to give you a visual reminder of the course.

**3** There are some sections on the bike where being aero is an advantage but not enough to justify a full TT bike. Lightweight is definitely the way to go here, for you and your bike.

**4** Arrive just a few days before race day. Cyprus is a great place to relax, unwind, eat, drink and slow things down. Which is great post-race but not for a tapering period!



Sean McFarlane enjoys a descent before the road turns skywards again







this one my legs have a whole new level of fatigue. My body regularly tells me to stop when I'm starting the run, but this time it screams at me. A murky mix of determination, nutrition and shouting just about gets me going. A relay team runner comes battering past. The sporadically placed aid stations provide useful targets. The first one, at 3.5km, seems to take a fortnight to reach, however. Mike is there, smiling as ever. For a second I hesitate to give him his requested high five in an attempt to conserve every last ounce of energy.

I almost ask him why I'm doing this but immediately the track softens and I remember why: because the Olympusman run is so difficult but so glorious, with the singletrack winding its way around Mount Olympus. So many corners turn into sensational vistas with this amazing island on full display. It's a mesmerising route and I'm getting to enjoy it in perfect weather. I'm reminded of what a luxury this all is as I try to keep moving forward. Positive thinking can only go so far though and my lack of run conditioning quickly shows. I'd love to be able to go back and apologise to the walkers who politely get out of my way for not being able to manage anything other than a grunt of gratitude. The walking's clearly contagious, and before long I succumb.

### THE ULTIMATE EXTENDER

Small inclines now seem like Everest. The final 500m of steep, rocky ascent have me looking over my shoulder, but thankfully I don't see anyone. I cross the line at 1,952m above sea level and finish the Olympusman for the third time. As always, it's been an enormous challenge and, for me, one that's impossible not to come back to, as



long as my body will let me. This race has once again delivered, and in abundance. It's a truly epic challenge in every sense. I'd managed to finish 4th in 6:44hrs with Drew Sharkey winning in 6:13hrs. He was able to post 1:54hr for the final 21km run, mightily impressive on such technical and undulating terrain, especially after that 86km bike leg.

Olympusman is a race that leaves you thinking about losing weight to perform well. Certainly, it requires an ability to cope with the climbing, or at least ride in such a way that allows to you to run in some form afterwards. That's far easier said

### KEY INFO

**First race** 2015  
**2017 starters** 42  
**2017 finishers** 41  
**Next date** TBC  
**November 2018**  
**Entry fee** €120 (TBC)  
**Nearest airport** Paphos International  
**Website** cyclingcy.com

than done, of course. The climbs aren't ridiculously steep, like those in the Lake District, but they are long and with fairly constant gradients. The bike course requires more or less continuous power of some degree, with only a few easy kilometres at best.

I couldn't fault the organisation, but perhaps just a tad of promotion would be a good idea, as other people need to know about the Olympusman. With the rest of Europe well into post-season shutdown, this surely has to be the ultimate race-season extender. Frankly, I feel privileged to have taken part. **220**