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Triathlon set to return to Riding Mountain

BY PERRY BERGSON

Much to Dave Lipchen's relief, Manitoba's biggest triathlon returns to Clear Lake next month.

The East St. Paul resident, who runs the Windburn Multi-Sport Academy, took over the Riding Mountain Triathlon from Brandon's Ellis and Deb Crowston in 2018.

It was a tough two years for Lipchen, who watched his coaching and race event business shrink rapidly when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020.

"If you had sat down with me on March 12, 2020, I would have told you I'm six months away from wiping out every business debt I had acquired to get Windburn Multi-Sport Academy off the ground," Lipchen said. "I was flying. I had 43 athletes walking into the summer of 2020, which is massive for any triathlon program anywhere to have that many athletes in March."

He had 12 athletes who had qualified for the world championships and seven training for Ironman Canada so he had a committed team.

He notes that a crowd draws a crowd, so he was hoping for more as spring turned into summer. But COVID-19 hit first.

"Obviously with what I do, I'm the number one thing on most people's lists to get cut," Lipchen said.

Soon he had just six athletes left, although many returned when he reduced his coaching fee to help people weather the training storm at home alone.

The next domino to fall was when he had to cancel his annual East St. Paul Canada Day Super Run. Then he started to worry about the triathlon.

"All of a sudden I realized that one-third of my whole year is Riding Mountain Triathlon, and I'm going to lose it as well," Lipchen said.

He made a three-year commitment to purchase the Riding Mountain Triathlon from the Crowstons and had to scramble to pay it off.

One solution he hit on was to hold a virtual Riding Mountain Triathlon, which ended up drawing 116 athletes from across Canada and the United States. Instead of performance-based prizes, he handed them out as draws.

"It was 116 people who were all sitting around home and needed to have something to do and we came up with the solution for them," Lipchen said. "That was a huge success."

But he's certainly happy to see the return of in-person racing at his premier event, which takes place on Aug. 13 at Clear Lake.

The Riding Mountain Triathlon was originally started in 1986 by Laurie Penton.

It was taken over in 1996 by Winnipegger Dave Lyon, a Manitoba track-and-field legend who died in 2013. The Crowstons worked closely with him for several years before and then took it over in 2007.

The race took a one-year hiatus in 2016 as Highway 10 was repaved, the only previous break in its history prior to COVID.

The triathlon features Olympic (1.5-kilometre swim, 40-km bike, 10-km run) and Sprint (750-metre swim, 20-km bike, five-km run) races for adults, and shorter distances for children the next day in its Kids Of Steel event. Both are part of the provincial race series.

Lipchen used the two years off to solve some of his logistical and management issues, although he added it was tough to plan without a concrete end date.

"You never knew when this thing (COVID) was going to flip on you so you were constantly



Riding Mountain Triathlon owner and race director Dave Lipchen, shown at the 2018 edition of the race, is eager to have the event back on Aug. 13 after a rough couple of years without it. (Photos by Perry Bergson/The Brandon Sun)

following the news and watching the different waves coming down the pipe," Lipchen said. "Just when you think things are starting to open up, all of a sudden you would be preparing for a major closer again."

"It got ultra frustrating to try to plan."

He said the biggest problem for race directors is that people were able to shut down from all their external commitments, whether that was taking children to events or adult athletes participating in their own sports. As a result, not everyone was eager to pick up where they left off prior to the pandemic.

"What I'm finding is that even though the talk of the town is that everybody wants to come back as soon as the races are there and the races have to be preparing because they're going to be bigger than ever and it's going to be crazy, the reality is that the races are just about half of what they've been for registrations," Lipchen said.

"They're at half or just under half. I'm currently sitting at about half, but my advantage is that I have three more weeks of registration and we're the last hurrah of the year."

Athletes can register until Aug. 11, two days before the race.

Lipchen is hoping for about 300 to 350 racers this year, down from the 502 adults he had in 2019 in his second year. The Crowstons set the record for the largest race in Manitoba when they drew 542 athletes in 2012.

The 2019 race drew the largest number of participants for a Kids Of Steel event in Manitoba history with 217 participants.

Jared Spier, who has long been one of the top triathletes in the province, serves as Triathlon Manitoba's executive director. He said one of the nearest things about the Riding Mountain race is that it attracts many athletes from Saskatchewan who don't participate in other Manitoba events. Elsewhere in Manitoba, Spier said the top athletes often have a pretty good idea



Registration for triathlons across Manitoba is down significantly this summer as society once again returns to events it took for granted prior to the pandemic.

of where they'll finish because they're toeing the line against the same athletes over and over.

That's not the case at Clear Lake.

"As an athlete when you don't know, you just have to push and give your best," Spier said. "It was always a good way to end the season and get a little bit more because there was an element of the unknown with the deeper field."

He said the hills on the bike course also provide a nice test, and the fact that many of the athletes stick around for the night in the campground was good for the kind of community building that triathlon is known for.

Spier is hopeful that time will eventually get the sport back on its feet. He noted one of the silver linings was that people got outside again — he met his mother and sister for walks for instance — and Spier hopes that translates one day.

But he adds it will take more than patience to rebuild the sport.

"You have to set a course and stay the course," Spier said. "There are actions we can take to draw things back and plenty of things we can do to adapt

the sport a little bit. We want it to grow with the times."

The association's introduction-to-triathlon program at the University of Manitoba proved very successful, and they've also beefed up their offerings on social media.

They are trying to explain the difference between the shorter, more achievable Olympic and Sprint distance races and their more formidable competitor, Ironman, which tends to draw a lot of the popular imagination but only appeals to a few athletes.

"That's what a lot of people associate with triathlon, those crazy skinny dudes in speedos who were racing in the '80s, or people crawling across the finish line," Spier said. "That's a hard image to shake. Those are iconic images of our sport, but that's not it. There is more to it than just those levels."

He said this summer, as the province opened up again, the association focused on helping its existing races to restart.

But that may change. Triathlon Manitoba owns all the necessary equipment, so it is looking to expand, and organizers in Hamiota, Brandon and Minnedosa have all explored the idea of staging fam-

ily-focused small events in the future. Spier sees that as key.

"It's a nice gateway for someone looking to get into maybe Riding Mountain at the end of the season," Spier said. "Riding Mountain is so big and can be an intimidating event. Having something you can do at your local pool with a bunch of your friends would be a great way for people to get into it."

He said the triathlon community is especially supportive as athletes who don't even know each other cheer each other on to accomplish things they might not have thought possible previously.

The Riding Mountain Triathlon is a good example of how to grow the sport, because people who are visiting the lake might see it and decide to give it a try a year later.

"Hopefully we'll see more and more of those people coming out to the Riding Mountain event and every other event and just giving it a try," Spier said.

While it may not be bigger this summer, Lipchen keeps trying to improve it.

With the time off, Lipchen found another dozen sponsors and was able to sink another \$15,000 into equipment for

the event. Even so, he's philosophical about how long it will take to return to pre-COVID levels.

"This is going to be a two- or three-year build back," Lipchen said. "It took a couple of years for it to shut down so it's going to take two or three years for it to build itself back up."

Spier deals with the challenge of rebuilding the sport every day.

"You train and train and train for one race," Spier said. "Most of the people we know and the kids in our program, the elite kids especially, they train all winter for races in the summer. When those races don't happen, you don't get the reward, and that's been one of the really tough things."

He noted there is also a community in training and at races that people simply couldn't replicate. With pools closed, they also couldn't train for the swim.

"It was pretty tough on everybody," Spier said. "Every reward was taken away, whether it was the racing or the camaraderie of being in a group. That's no different than any other area of life, but sport is one of those things that help us through all of that stuff. It's a great crutch for so many people to keep them afloat."

While Lipchen is facing a challenging period in the sport's history, he remains committed to the Riding Mountain Triathlon. He understands what's come before at Clear Lake, and is hopeful better days lie ahead.

"I'm so lucky to have been able to be the next guy asked to take over," Lipchen said. "There aren't many opportunities like this that will ever come up in somebody's lifetime. I want to make sure I take it on as seriously as I can and make sure I get this thing built up like we all keep dreaming down the road."

"We've got something very special here and my job is to just keep making it bigger and better."

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