**Experience of Holkham…. My First Half Distance Triathlon by Chris Davis**

**Event:** Holkham Half Distance Triathlon (1.2-mile swim, 56-mile bike, 13.1-mile run)

**Date:** Sunday 4th July 2021

**Weather conditions:** Warm and sunny start, hotter as day progressed

**Target:** Finish in 6 hours 45 minutes

Am I ready? Am I going to be able to finish? Is that what 1.2 miles looks like, that looks a long way?! Will I be able to…… ahh no! I’ve stepped in bird poo again!!! That’s one way to take my mind off the worries before my first half distance triathlon. These were some of the thoughts that went through my mind as I prepared for the race.

I was excited to be racing again and taking on my first half distance triathlon, but also a little nervous because my preparation had been limited by a calf injury and hernia operation. I was confident I would finish but had to set my expectations accordingly. Whilst I set out target times, this was primarily about completing the distance, time was secondary.

I took up triathlon 3 years ago, having previously concentrated on running, completing 10 marathons. I had been looking for a new challenge for a while but my lack of swimming ability held me back. I finally took the plunge in 2018 and joined DWOT where I received excellent coaching and support and I have completed several shorter distance triathlons.

On the morning of the race, I arrived early. Laid my kit out and checked it several times to ensure everything was in the right position. I put on my wetsuit and made my way to the swim start. The swim course was to the end of the lake, round an island and back again. It looked a long way to someone with my limited swimming ability.

Swimmers were released two at a time and when it came to my turn, it started off comfortably. However, things soon started to get rough. Everyone was fighting for the same space, arms and legs flew everywhere. I am comfortable with the physical side and more than held my own.

Having marked my territory, I settled into a comfortable rhythm which lasted until I approached the island where a break in the trees allowed the sun to shine straight into my eyes. I had no idea where I was going and had just followed the splash from other swimmers. My Garmin later confirmed that they didn’t lead me astray.

On the way back a new obstacle hit me, literally. I had been fighting through the reeds, using force to push through them. However, as I powered on, I hit a long expanse of rock just below the surface. I tried to get into deeper water but the crowd had built up around me and it was impossible, so I had to curtail my stroke under water. It was like swimming with a limp until I managed to force my way out.

Eventually, I felt I must be coming near the end of the swim, although I couldn’t be certain as the sun was still blinding me when I looked towards transition. I heard encouraging voices from the side of the lake and I was there, hauling myself out of the lake and running back towards transition. I looked at my watch as I went through transition, 50 minutes, I was on schedule.

Back into transition, I took on board an energy gel, put on my cycling gear and set off on the long trek to the cycle mount point. Having marshalled this station at the club triathlon a few weeks earlier, I was fully aware of the mistakes people can make trying to get on the bike too quickly. Therefore, I took it slow and steady and I was off on the bike leg.

I set myself a target of averaging 25km per hour, not quick, but calculated to leave me enough energy for the run. I struggled to get going across the Holkham Estate as the hill was deceptively steep, however once I left the estate the pace picked up.

Keeping to schedule meant that I was overtaken by far more people than I overtook and I had to maintain my discipline and stick to my race plan. The first section of the course was technical with lots of tight turns and corners. Eventually, I emerged onto a long straight road that went on for miles. Whilst this was technically easier, the increased traffic made it harder to take on food and liquid.

I tried to stick to my nutrition plan of using energy gels and bars to give me 60g of carbohydrate per hour. I pretty much managed this during the bike, but I did make two mistakes. Firstly, I ate a ham roll to break up the monotony of sweetness, but it didn’t digest very well. Secondly, I didn’t take on enough fluid, which came back to bite me on the run.

Re-entering the estate, I picked up speed going down the hill. The runners were going in the opposite direction and I passed a few DWOT members who shouted encouragement as I sped past. At transition I took the slow elegant option to avoid falling flat on my face as I had in a previous event.

Back in transition, I looked at my watch, I had hit my target pace. I was confident as I set out on the run, 3 laps around the grounds. This was my best discipline, I had run many quick half marathons, admittedly not after a 1.2-mile swim and a 56-mile bike ride, but I was feeling fresh.

All went well for the first 3 miles. The hill was significant but manageable and I maintained a reasonable pace. The rest of the first lap was quite flat but towards the end I started to lose energy, feeling hot and dehydrated. My nutrition plan was abandoned and I started to grab any drink available but couldn’t stomach gels or solids.

By the start of the second lap, I was struggling. Dave P popped out from behind a tree and pointed his camera at me, so I had to put on a bit of show. However, by the time I got halfway up the hill my legs had turned to mush and I had to walk to the top and jog the flat bits.

At the end of the lap it was soul destroying watching people peeling off to the finish line whilst I had another lap to go. I struggled up the hill but on reaching the top, my second wind kicked in and I managed to run the rest quicker than expected.

I cannot describe the feeling of relief and joy as I turned and ran across the orange carpet to the finish line. I had done it; I had completed my first half distance triathlon. It was tough and there were times when I felt like giving up, but I am so proud of the fact that I didn’t listen to those doubts and continued to the finish. I finished in 7 hours 17 minutes, about half an hour longer than my target.

After a few days’ reflection, I have concluded that I thoroughly enjoyed the experience and am proud to have achieved my aim. I got things wrong for sure, my preparation and training were not ideal and my nutrition plan needs refinement. The time was not great but it gives me a target to beat. Would I do it again? Well, I have entered the Midnight Man Half in a few weeks to keep up the momentum and I now have a target to beat, so watch this space.