

BLIND AMBITION



Given the time and dedication it takes to train for what must surely be one of the world's most gruelling three-day endurance events, it's no wonder there are few athletes who can lay claim to being 'Ultraman'. At the inaugural Ultraman Australia this year, John Domandl joined these exclusive ranks. What makes his achievement all the more impressive, however, is that he has a significant visual impairment. He shares with us his experiences from the race.

Words: John Domandl | Images: Barry Alsop

John Domandl has an eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa. It's a degenerative eye condition leading to complete blindness, he explains. "I have had poor eyesight all my life and it has deteriorated to about 15 per cent now; however, I am trying to beat it with a positive attitude, exercise and fitness. I know it's a losing battle and I am on borrowed time, but I am trying to make the most of it," he tells *TMSM*.

John's triathlon career started out almost 30 years ago as a solo competitor when his eyesight was significantly better. "I could never achieve my full potential in triathlons because of my sight. I would always get a bit lost in the swim or miss marker buoys, and on the bike I had to ride very cautiously and I was limited to a slower speed. On the run leg I would sometimes run into poles and fall over. My friends would help me by methodically going over each course before an event. I was fortunate enough, with some help from my mates, to complete over 120 triathlons in distances from sprint to Ironman safely and independently. When my eyesight deteriorated in the late 1990s, I had to walk away from triathlon. It broke my heart."

What followed were a few years of soul searching, he says. "There was a transition period in my life, but I never gave up or lost sight of who I was or where I was going. In 2010 I bought my first tandem bike and took part in a 1200-kilometre charity ride. I then restarted my triathlon career and haven't looked back. I have finished every distance from sprint to Ironman as a vision-impaired athlete and I am now the only person in the world to have completed all distances as a sighted person and a legally blind person. I represented Australia in the 2013 World Paratriathlon Championships in London, where I finished 11th in a strong field of 24. I was also the oldest male competitor and with my best mate Alister, we were the oldest team. I can now add the Ultraman to the list.

"I still have a number of other challenges ahead of me including every Ironman distance in Australia and hopefully the ultimate, the Ironman World Championships in Kona, Hawaii one day."

Left: Domandl and guide Dale White about to embark on the swim leg
Below: White leads Domandl up the beach

Day 1: 10-kilometre swim, 145-kilometre ride

After 18 months of training, planning and preparation, hundreds of kilometres in the pool, thousands of kilometres running and riding, hundreds of hours on the spin bike and treadmill, it all culminated at 4:30am on a Saturday morning in Noosa. My partner Kim Jenkins and crew captain, friend and swim guide Dale White led me across the road to the Noosa Surf Club for pre-race check-in. It was dark. There was a cool nip in the air and we were wearing our wetsuits. Kim found our paddler, who couldn't believe we were about to swim 10 kilometres in the ocean. The Hot Ginger Chorus singing the most beautiful version of the national anthem followed welcoming speeches and an indigenous ceremony. The backdrop to all of this was an incredible Noosa sunrise.

As the 36 other brave, or crazy, athletes made their way down the beach, we were all shaking hands and wishing everyone the best of luck. Then it struck me, holy crap! We were finally here. I couldn't believe I had made it to the start line of an Ultraman.

It was a true international field. There were athletes from Argentina, Brunei, Canada, England, Italy and New Zealand. Crews had flown in to help from America, Canada, Japan and the Philippines, while officials had travelled from Hawaii.

Dale and I attached the ankle tether to connect us and swam out to the start buoys. The gun went off and we were away, holding a steady line north to the first turn before heading back to the start area. We then made our way south out around the Noosa headland towards the surf break known as the 'Boiling Pot'. We were going great until at around four kilometres into the swim Dale started to get cramps. I suggested he get to the IRB. He had done a fantastic job getting me to this point, which was our plan, and the paddler was there to guide me anyway. I got to the outer turnaround buoy in about 1:35. I was on top of the world. Nutrition, pace and comfort



Heading back to the northern buoys, I started to tire and my mouth was becoming ulcerated from the salt water. As I rounded the northern marker, my paddler told me I still had about two kilometres to go. I knew something was wrong, I was almost out of nutrition and electrolytes. Kim later recalled that she had said to a friend while looking on from the beach, "Look at that poor bastard, he looks like he is way off course." The friend looked through his camera lens and said, "That poor bastard is John". Kim's heart pounded. Oh well, it's Ultraman. I finally made it to the beach in 4:06. It was about 40 minutes slower than I had anticipated and I was in 30th place overall. Most peoples' Garmin's showed about 10.7 to 10.9 kilometres after the swim. Because I zig zag when I swim, I probably swam about 11.5 kilometres. Oh well, it's Ultraman.

With aching shoulders and a belly full of salt water, but happy to feel the sand beneath my feet, I ran up the beach escorted by Dale to heart-warming applause and some wonderful commentary from Steve King.

After a protein shake, a blueberry muffin, a kiss from Kim and a hug from my son Ryan and daughter Kelly, it was time to get on the tandem bike with my pilot, Alister (Al) Trendell. We headed out of town with crew in tow. I told Al I was crook in the guts and he said we would take it easy for a while. With 145 kilometres on an out and back course with over 1600 metres of elevation and temperatures around 30°C, it wasn't going to be an easy ride. Fifty kilometres into the race and we were starting to make up lost time. The countryside was spectacular with rolling hills, sparkling rivers and sub-tropical rainforests on offer. It was a perfect showcase of the Aussie countryside for the international athletes and crews. The first big hill loomed; it was a steady climb for about a kilometre. We dug deep and powered to the top. My head was spinning and I nearly threw up. I sucked in some big breaths and had a drink before we motored down the other side. I was recovering well, but the next hill was a beast (20 per cent). We were very concerned about this one given the possibility of breaking a chain or hub. Al made the call about halfway up to hop off and push. We were riding seven kilometres per hour and pushing at five kilometres per hour. Luckily, we only needed to push for 80 metres. It was good to use different muscles for a while. At the turnaround at Gympie East School the crew had put on an all-you-can-eat buffet. My stomach was still playing up but some Coke, watermelon and a gel did the trick. With over 75 kilometres down there were still 70 kilometres to go. As we descended the 'beast' on the return leg, Alister was right on his game, throwing the tandem around like a lightweight



Above: Domandl being guided by his son Ryan

MTB at 75 kilometres per hour. The disc brakes were smoking on the switchbacks. The crew car could smell the rotors burning and hear them screaming. I was feeling much better and we were working fantastic as a team. Passing a few more friendly faces on the return, we arrived at the top of the big descent near Tewanin. As we rolled over the crest, I hinted to Alister that there was a 'need for speed' and I was ready and game. The hill was huge. We got comfortable on the tandem, Al went into the tuck, I lowered my body weight and stayed flat and steady. The sound of the wind screaming past was unbelievable. I didn't move an inch, fearing it would destabilise the tandem. We were flying. At the bottom, I had a sigh of relief and gave Al a pat on the back and said "Good work mate. What did we do?" He replied that we'd clocked 90 kph. That was all. We didn't talk much. Being on the back of a tandem at 90 kph and not being able to see anything is an unbelievable experience. Trusting someone with your life at those speeds is a key element in an incredible tandem team. There were a few more kilometres into town to the finish line where another fabulous reception from Steve and the crowd was waiting. There were congratulations all round. We had improved our placing from 30th to 19th overall. We had the sixth-fastest ride on the day and passed one third of the field. The big surprise for me, I was now second in my age group. This was an unbelievable dream. Back to the team bunker, a great pasta dinner, clean the tandem, pack the team car for the next day and off to bed.

Day 2: 275-kilometre Bike, over 2600-metres elevation. 4.15am start

After a very uncomfortable night with stomach and

leg cramps, it was all systems go again. Alister and I were pumped for another big day. With a police escort, we rolled out into the cold in a two-by-two formation to the edge of town. It was wonderful recapping day one with the other athletes. When the police escort peeled off, fellow competitors Davo and Gagey set the pace, with Trout, Cal, Rob, TB and The Merg settling in behind them. As the sun came up over the Noosa hinterland, Alister and I were happy to watch everything unfold for the first 50 kilometres. At one stage we had some fun attacking the group and held down third position for a while. We were riding extremely well and planned to stop every 70 kilometres. Hearing Stevo's voice commentating at the 100- and 180-kilometre points was wonderful. A loop on the Old Bruce Hwy gave us an opportunity to see and acknowledge some of the other competitors. Al and I loved it. That's Ultraman. The big climb over the Kenilworth Range was a real test for man and machine. I thought I was dreaming or Alister was going mad when he said something about a nun doing a lap dance at the top of the hill. I later found out it was one of the other crews having some fun. Over the top and we leaned into an exhilarating 80-kilometre-per-hour descent down the range. We were riding brilliantly. Crossing the Bruce Hwy and back through Coolumb along the coast road was awesome. These roads suited us well. Team Tandem was smoking back to Noosa Town. We crossed the finish line at the surf club in 8:37, elevating our overall position to eighth and retaining second in my age category with a good 2:10 buffer over third place.

Day 3: 84-kilometre run

Another 4.15am start. As I prepared myself mentally for one of the toughest days of my life, I reflected on the last two days and the last 18 months of training. I was very quiet, I knew I was heading into battle and the enemy was within. My son Ryan was going to guide me for the first seven kilometres with Dale and Alister taking turns at seven-to-10-kilometre intervals. As we walked to the start line, Ryan asked me in a very concerned voice if I was ok. In a subdued voice I answered, "Yes, I'm fine." He was concerned, which for me was wonderful. It was dark and cold when the gun went off at 5:30am. We stayed towards the back of the group so we

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didn't interfere with any other competitors. Settling into a comfortable pace, it was one of the most unbelievable experiences of my life. I was starting an incredible journey with my son guiding me into the unknown.

As we passed the aquatic centre, we saw other athletes silhouetted behind another beautiful Noosa Coast sunrise. The mood was very quiet and sombre. Dale took over from Ryan after the aquatic centre and navigated along the stunning coastal paths heading south towards Twin



Left: With tandem bike partner Alister Trendell

Waters. The temperature was heating up. With runners trading positions and crews leap frogging each other, it was very entertaining. The crews were supporting all the athletes and themselves. Alister took over from Dale and took me through to the 21-kilometre mark. I was happy with the 2:06 split and comfortable with the pace. Stevo was there doing a fantastic job commentating as well. Ryan took me through the hills. I had a small accident rolling my right ankle and tumbling down a small embankment, stopping just before I rolled onto the road. I recovered and had to walk for a while. Ryan was upset but I assured him I was fine. We power-walked the hills and made a few more changes over the next few kilometres. We crossed paths with the lead runners at the Maroochydore airport. We slowed and acknowledged the leaders and they also returned the favour. That's Ultraman!

Passing the other runners was wonderful, seeing The Merg, Trout, Stinky Hand, Foxy and Ailie. I made the 42-kilometre turnaround in 4:35. Another goal achieved for the weekend. However, the body was telling me something was wrong. I was struggling to eat anything and my left ankle and foot were getting very sore and swollen. I knew the major battle had just begun. Clair passed me without a word – she was hurting too. I was shuffling along with Des and Haydo for a while. We were all continually supporting each other. At the 55-kilometre mark I knew I was in big trouble, my stomach was cramping and my leg was in all sorts of pain. Over the last 30 kilometres, I threw up a

Below: Crossing the finish line with son Ryan



number of times. I couldn't keep anything down – food, salt tablets, magnesium, painkillers. I threw up everything. All I could stomach was Coke (the magic black stuff). The body was on overdrive. I don't remember much of the last 30 kilometres but I know my wonderful crew kept me going. My goal was their goal. Kim and Alister strategised. The main thing was to keep me moving. My three different guides were unbelievable. My beautiful son Ryan just wanted me to take it easy, Dale was Mr Motivation and Alister was dragging me like a mongrel dog (which worked the best). Kim was at every stop with a cold hat and towel and fresh Coke. Charlie passed me somewhere in the last 21 kilometres and gave some support.

I remember getting close to the school and seeing kids everywhere, it was just after 3:00pm. School's out, skateboards, scooters, kids on mobile phones, buses, absolute chaos. That's Ultraman.

Alister and I were running on the edge of the road and missed a turn arrow. We ran down a hill and Krista's team chased us and told us to go back. Al and I power-walked up and got back on track. With five kilometres to go, Ryan took over guiding and Alister ran in front so we didn't miss any more arrows. As we ran back into town over the bridges, I heard Krista's team coming up behind us, they took a wrong turn too. We waved them past and walked around the Sheraton Hotel, where Dale was waiting to join us to run the final leg up the beach together. We walked down the soft sand and started running the final 500 metres to the finish line. The battle was almost over and I had won, I had conquered the enemy within. Everything was pretty blurry at this stage. Ryan told me everyone on the beach was standing and clapping, even people in the surf. It was a *Chariots of Fire* moment.

It was almost over, after a 10-kilometre swim, 421-kilometre bike and 84-kilometre run – a grand total of 515 kilometres in three days. I couldn't believe what we had achieved. We were about to create history. But I know I couldn't have done it without my ultra crew; Kim, Dale, Alister and Ryan. As we all crossed the finish line, all I remember is hearing Steve King's wonderful commentary and the crowd cheering. We finished in 28:23:00 for 21st place overall. I finished an amazing second in my age group. I am also the first vision impaired person in the world to complete an Ultraman. What an unbelievable three days it was: A true highlight of my amazing sporting career.

John would like to thank Tony Horton, Craig Percival and the Ultraman crew for giving him the opportunity to become an Ultraman. 🏆