

Swimrun - Inch by Inch

A fun day around a wee loch

A couple of years ago a friend of mine from back home contacted me and asked if I wanted to team up with him to do the "Ö till Ö" (island to island in Swedish) race. Having heard about the crazy race involving 10km of swimming and 65km of running through the beautiful archipelago of Stockholm I needed no convincing. Of course, I said!

The idea behind the race started as a drunken bet where the people involved were supposed to get from one restaurant in the archipelago to another one. The losing team would pay for hotel, dinner and drinks. It took them more than 24 hours the first time, too tired to take advantage of the price.

It later became an official race. The first year eleven teams entered. Only two finished. The sport of swimrun (Yes, it is one word. Not two.) was born.

After that swimrun has grown at a phenomenal rate in Sweden with a lot more (and shorter) races to choose from. It has also expanded to Finland, Switzerland and UK.

Because of the quickly growing popularity of the sport, and after being ranked as one of the toughest endurance races in the world by CNN, it is not surprising that actually getting a chance to do the Ö till Ö race is quite small.

You can get in on merits. But unless you have won like six Ironman, forget about it. There is also a lottery. We tried both. Got nothing.

Looking around for alternatives we came across a new swimrun race at Loch Lomond, north of Glasgow; Inch by Inch. (the name of the islands all start with Inch-)

8km swimming, 25km running around a Scottish loch. What could possibly go wrong?

The whole idea of swimrun is that you swim and run. And then swim. And then run. And... You get it. So to be able to do this you swim wearing your running shoes. And you run wearing the wetsuit. But that's not all. The mandatory equipment list for Scotland was:

- 1 First aid pressure bandage.
- 2 Wetsuits suitable for water temperature of 10 degrees Celsius.
- 1 Compass
- 1 Waterproof map holder
- Map
- 2 Whistles - at least 1 to be externally attached to swim safety buoy
- 1 backpack, hip pack or something to carry the mandatory equipment
- 1 swim safety buoy / tow float
- Race bibs
- Swim caps

You need to carry all of this equipment (plus nutrition) throughout the race.



-Getting out of the water after swim number one

During the first couple of years of swimrun you were allowed to bring any floatation device; surf board, kayak. Only drawback was that you had to run with it as well. Now they have made it a bit more restrictive. Today most people wear paddles, and a pullbuoy on a strap around your thigh. That way you can twist it around so you can run without having to carry it.

Some people have experimented with fins but it is too hard on the legs considering all the running.

The sport has grown so much that there are special swimrun wetsuits (of course there are!). They are softer than the Tri version and have a zipper on the front to be able to reach stuff in the pockets underneath, and also let air in while running.

The first thing you do when buying one of these suits is to cut the arms and legs off! A bit reluctantly I must admit. To have more movement most people cut them above knees and elbows. It is surprisingly easy to run in it.



The organizers for the race in Scotland called it a race for bored triathletes. And talking to people at the race I would say that 95% were triathletes. Don't know if they were bored or not.

But I think swimrun has two main differences from triathlon. One - swimrun is done in teams of two. Two - you are a lot closer to nature.

The team part is mainly done for safety reasons. But it also gives another dimension to it. You do everything together. It's not a relay. Some people even have a rope between them. So you start, suffer and finish together. You help each other along.

The nature part makes it more interesting. I have never run across so many different types of terrain and surfaces; trails, cow pastures, forest, swamps, across fallen trees, along the shore in the water, road, stairs etc. This is the first time I have swum on a run leg! It makes it a lot more fun than an out and back on a paved road.



About 45 teams had signed up. It was impossible to judge the other teams by looks. Everyone was really friendly and it was quite clear that this would be the first swimrun for most. If not for all. A few Ironman bags were visible during the race brief.

The water temperature had been hovering around 13-14 leading up to the race. I was a bit worried that I would get cold during the longest 2.7km swim. But during the race brief we were told about a lady who had recently swam the whole length of the lake non stop. Without a wetsuit. Took her 15 hours. At that point I promised myself I would never complain during the race. Regardless how cold I would be.

It was a bit cold at first but with temperatures now at about 15 it turned out to be just perfect. Nice fresh lake water. I loved it.

We all know that the wether in the the UK is not quite the same as the south of France. Let's leave it at that. But on race day Scotland showed us how incredibly beautiful it can be. Clear blue skies. Light winds. Air temperature at around 15. Just perfect.

Even while swimming from one island to the next I was able to catch a glimpse of the highlands while taking a breath, thinking how beautiful it was.

Getting into the water for the first swim we tried to position ourselves at the front. But soon it was obvious that there were a lot of good swimmers around us. Quite a few teams passed us. First swim was 1500 meters.



-First swim was to the island in the middle

The navigation for all the swims turned out to be easy. On land, not so much. We were given a map and directions in text format such as "Head to the right, stay on low ground until you reach bath near old saw mill, then follow it to old boat house. ". Sounds pretty straight forward but when you get out of the water it wasn't that obvious where to go and what it meant. There were no markings. I had memorized most of the directions so I knew roughly where to go. But we still made a few wrong turns. After one of the swims we were told by one of the volunteers to just follow the path to the next swim entry. Minutes later we stood in a chest high fern forest still wondering where the path was.

Two hours into the race my team mate started struggling. He had hit the wall and felt sick. But they say that a golden rule of swimrun is to never stop. So we slowed right down but kept moving. Having to climb the 360 meter Conic Hill didn't make it easier. But he never complained and eventually we could slowly start picking up the speed again.

Someone having a rough day is part of it and you just have to deal with it.



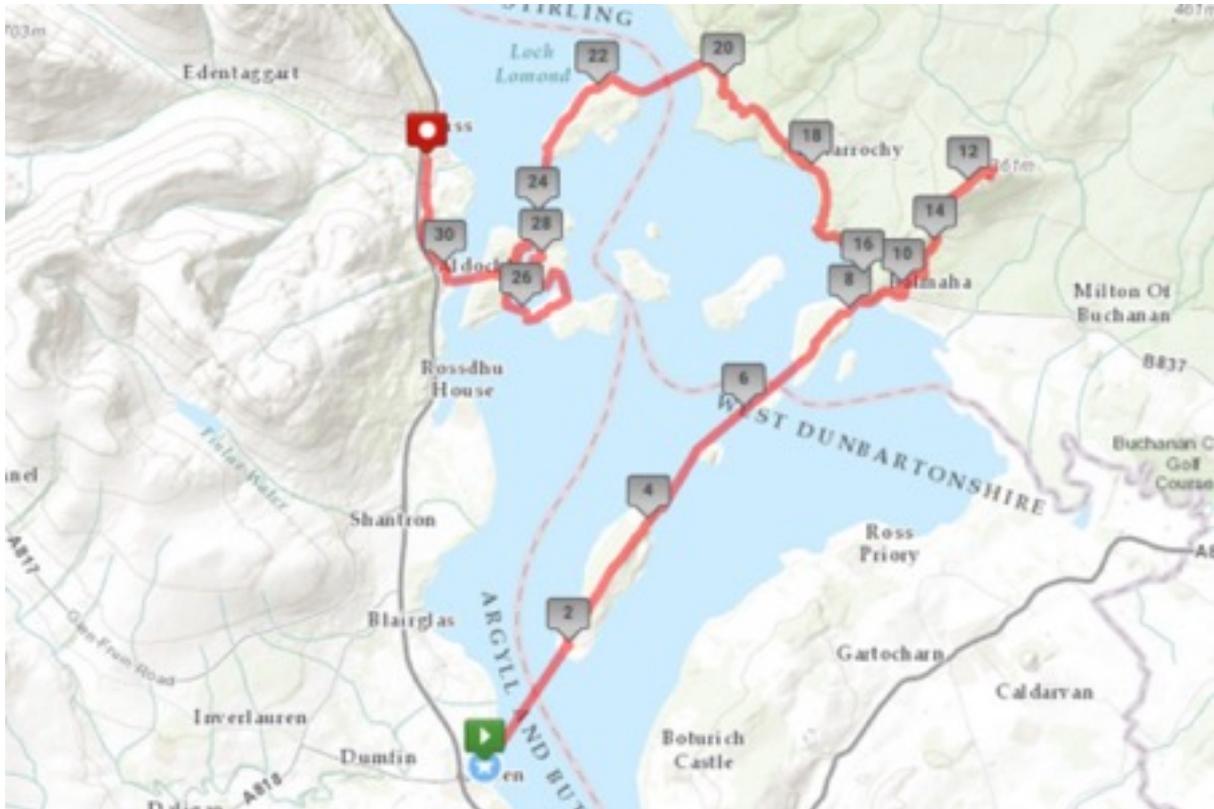
-The second place team overall on top of Conic Hill.

The second half of the race was a lot more technical with shorter swims up to 800 meters and shorter runs. Even though you carry what you wear, transitions are important in swimrun as well. Getting goggles, paddles and pull buoy in place or out of the way. I don't know how many times I forgot to pull up the front zipper on the wetsuit while we practiced in Sweden before the race.

With ten swims and ten runs in Scotland there were a lot of transitions.

Some aid stations with coke, cookies and jelly beans were a welcome break from the gels I was carrying.

It was a no chip race. Instead every time you got out of the water you had to yell your team number and name ("Team 2, Return of the Vikings!") to the Marshall standing there with a piece of paper. Kind of old school but it worked just fine.



-Race map

Jumping in the water for the last 300 meter swim back to the main land my shoulders had had enough.

A 2.5 km run along a paved road finished the race.

I realize how much the weather meant. It would have been a completely different race if it had been rainy, cold and windy. Loch Lomond is the biggest lake in the UK so it could easily be very choppy. But regardless, it's a great race. I think both the location and the distances are very good. And the swimrun format is fun.

I think we came in 9th place overall. Total time 6:20. There were some fast teams there and it wouldn't have made a big difference if we had had a perfect day.

It was never about a time or a placement anyway. It was all about trying the sport in race conditions. Making it around the course without hurting too much (Thank you Jason for getting me well prepared for this) and seeing a new place.

We will still try to get into the Ö till Ö race. But until then there are some nice alternatives.

/Anders Strandberg



-Two happy finishers

For more pictures check out the swimrunUK Facebook page