

**XTERRA**

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My 2016 Belgium XTERRA

June 30, 2016 / in [All](#), [All Triathlon](#), [Race Reports](#) / by XTERRA

By Lorenn Walker

"Bravo Madame! Bravo Madame!" spectators yell enthusiastically to me during Belgium's first XTERRA June 11, 2016 as I finish climbing a steep dirt path and complete the first lap of the bike course. Along with these lovely people, is Dave Nicholas (aka *Kahuna*), who's yelling: "Come on old lady, get your butt going!" I laugh and throw him my sunglasses asking: "Can you hold these for me?" I've known and appreciated Dave since the 1990s when he directed the *Wahine Windsurfing* contests at Diamond Head on O'ahu.

My first XTERRA experience was at Wailea, Maui in 1999, when no qualification was necessary for the World Championships. I had gotten a mountain bike about two years before, and an off-road triathlon sounded fun. Unfortunately, my mountain biking experience consisted mainly of riding O'ahu's asphalt paved Peacock Flats road. The World's bike course at Wailea was A LOT more technical than I expected. I crashed about ten miles into the bike course and dislocated two right hand fingers that stuck out

at a 90-degree angle. I ran for about six miles pushing my bike, trying to avoid seeing my finger's hideously twisted out sideways, but that's another story.

In June 2016, I had some work and conferences in Europe, and thought it would be fun to do an XTERRA there, which my friend Barbara Peterson encouraged me to do. Like my first Maui race, the Belgium XTERRA turned out to be way more demanding than expected.

Forty-eight hours after I leave my house on the North Shore of O'ahu, I arrive in Namur, Belgium, an hour train ride from Brussels. I had arrived in Belgium the day before and spent my first night in Leuven where I gave a talk about my work in restorative justice. My work reminds me of XTERRA because it's about suffering and healing, only from crime, not mountain biking.

Denis Detinne and Florian Badoux are the brilliant Belgium race organizers. They helped me find my hotel and a bike to use. The first bike I try is my size, but its shifters are broken and it won't go into the lowest gear. Another kind Belgium biker tries to fix it, but he ends up messing it up further. Luckily, there is another bike. I use it even though it is too big for me and has tubed tires that need to be inflated around 40-45 pounds, while I've been using tubeless tires running about 20 pounds. The bike I use also has less gears than what I am used to, which coupled with my jet lag, makes biking up the hills especially hard. I am spoiled from my beloved *Santa Cruz* carbon bikes and Evo wheels. Still, I am hugely grateful to Denis and Florain for their kindness and help getting me the bike. It was much easier than bringing one from Hawai'i. Besides I only want to finish the race in a decent time, and not be last.

The race venue Namur is stunningly beautiful. It is an ancient European capital for French speaking Belgians. The town is filled with cobblestone streets from the Middle Ages, and old ornate stone buildings.

The race is held in the *Citadel* [<http://www.ville.namur.be/page.asp?langue=EN&id=14461>], which was first developed in the year 1000: "The Citadel of Namur has, at all times, held a strategic position in the heart of Europe. First of all as a command centre of an important earldom in the Middle Ages, it was then coveted and besieged by all the Great Powers of Europe between the 15th and 19th century."

The Citadel is a fantastic fort that sits on a giant hill overlooking the town and rushing rivers that come together below. A massive

stonewall encloses the Citadel that includes a castle, numerous other rock structures, along with all the cobblestone roads. The race center is held in an area of the Citadel that looks like an arena. Denis says this area was developed in the 17th Century as a village with markets, and other facilities for the community.

I practice riding the bike course two days before the race. I am exhausted, but confident I can take my time seeing what the course is like because the sun stays out in Belgium until after 10 pm in June. It'll still be light when I finish.

The course is surprisingly tough to me. "What was I thinking?" begins to pop into my head frequently. I'd watched the race videos, and the distance didn't seem so far, 20 miles, and the hills didn't look super steep. Belgium is pretty flat, right? I signed up thinking we were going to ride in some *easy peasy* park course.

Maybe if Belgium hadn't been inundated with torrential rains all spring, the bike course would have been much drier. I appreciated how the rain made the course lush with bright green trees and bushes, but the muddy and deeply rooted trails are hard to ride; especially on the steep sections. There is so much water coming down some of the trails I'm trying to ride up that there are gushing tiny rivers flowing down! I end up pushing my bike uphill so much that my shoulder (not the one I broke at the 2014 XTERRA Worlds, sorry yet another story) gets hurt from the bike pushing activity. No worries about an injured shoulder decreasing my swimming performance though. The unprecedented rains create extremely strong currents in the river. The swim is canceled. As Dave explains: "It's like a dam burst basically. Normally the force of the river current flows around 70m but now it's 450m." Despite having practiced for months getting a wetsuit on and off (thank you again Jay Weber from XTERRA Wetsuits for the helpful info on that) it's a relief that we're spared having to swim in what looks like Willy Wonka's chocolate river. We do an extra run instead of the swim on race day.

After it takes me three hours to finish one loop practicing the bike course catastrophe thinking sets in. I am worried about getting hurt, and being in the way of more competent bikers during the race. "I'm gonna get lapped for sure," I think. I consider not doing it at all or maybe doing the XTERRA *Lite* that is only half the distance? After a few hours of obsessing, I decide: "Of course I'm doing it! I brought all my stuff. I'll go slow. Be careful. No Cindi Topel or Barbara Peterson here to beat me. I'll do my best and just have fun!"

The race starts at 1:30 pm on June 11th, four days after I arrived in

Europe. It's raining when I leave the hotel on my big bike. I'm cold until I start biking up the hill to the start at the Citadel, which takes about 45 minutes due to closed roads for the race.

By the time I get to the race start I feel good. I rack my bike next to Nathan an American Navy man, working in Germany. I'm wondering now if it was Nathan who told me that the bike course is 5000 feet in elevation? It sure seemed like it was that much during my practice ride, but it turns out the bike course is only 1200 meters, which equals about 3900 feet, and is about 1100 feet more than the Worlds at Kapalua that is roughly 2800 feet.

It's fun chatting with Dave's girlfriend Rosemary, and others waiting for the race to start. I notice most of the racers are really fit young men.

The race begins. My run (replacing the swim) is really slow, but I feel fine! I know I am going to finish the race, and with care, injury free.

After my first bike loop, when the dear Belgians who are cheerfully bravo-ing me, and Dave's yelling at me to get my old ass going, I'm feeling confident I can do the second loop faster. Too bad I got a little too confident, and go too fast on a downhill muddy section.

My crash is one of those projectile headfirst sort. It's like your body's a missile and shoots straight out. Luckily, my helmet stays on when my head slams into a stonewall. Quickly I'm back on my bike peddling. I notice only minor scrapes and little blood. Nothing really hurts, but I begin to feel my helmet increasingly get tighter around my forehead. It takes me about thirty minutes to muster enough courage to touch my forehead. "Shit, black eye" I think when I finally feel a big swollen lump above my left eyebrow. "Just in time for the Spain speech in five days." I brought makeup though and have developed humility from about five black eyes in my lifetime from sports (once I mediated a child protection case in family court with two black eyes from a windsurfing contest at Hookipa on Maui, and really, my husband is a business professor and one of the nicest people in the world).

After the crash I slow down, and bike way more conservative. But on some of the hills towards the end of the bike course, I manage to pass some of the younger guys pushing their bikes up. Bad me yells, "Watch out your grandma's on your left!" Those who understand English laugh, and again I enjoy hearing. "Bravo Madame!"

Finally, I finish the bike course and am running the 10K. I have been racing for 4 hours by now, and feel strong. I'm surprised

that I manage to pass people running. My usual cramps are kept at bay with the *HotShot* (formerly *Itsthenerve*) potion that I took, and tell others about who are walking because of their cramps (for real, if you cramp try this stuff that Rod MacKinnon, a long distance paddler, MD, and 2003 Nobel Chemistry Prize winner, developed to deal with his cramps).

I finish the race in 5:02, the longest XTERRA I've ever done. The men's winner is 35-year-old Kris Coddens who finished in 2:33 and the women's winner is 37-year-old Helena Erbenova who did it in 3:01. It turns out there were a lot of young men in the race. Out of the 472 finishers only 35 were women, and of the 28 people who DNF'ed, only one was a woman.

After the race I long to soak in a nice warm bath at my cozy hotel, but the after race meal seduces me. It's giant sized meatballs covered in garlic tomato sauce with a huge serving of freshly made *pommes frites* (French fries). I sit and enjoy the food, and company of Johannes Franzky, and his mom, from Germany. He won the 35-year old age group finishing in 2:51.

As we eat, the weather worsens. It's pouring rain now with lightening and thunder. I'm shivering and fantasizing about a warm jacket I left in my suitcase at the hotel. I'm not sure how I did in the race, and while I didn't see any women around my age, I wonder if I won my age group? I can wait no longer and decide to leave. It's getting darker out, and I have to ride the bike back to my hotel, which turns out to be the scariest part of the race. I ride down a long winding steep hill on slippery cobblestones in pouring rain with thunder. I go ridiculously slow imagining my hot bath.

I'm really happy I did the race, and makeup worked fine for the speech in Spain. Most of my restorative justice friends also know I do these races and sometimes look beat up.

BIG bravos to everyone who does what they fear they cannot. Thank you Denis and Florian, and a GIANT mahalo to Dave Nicholas for all the races, kindness and laughs over the years (but dude, please dump Trump!).

Lorenn is a sixteen time XTERRA World Championship female age group finisher—5 first places and 15x on the podium—64 years old in 2016.

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