

Ilija Trojanow: Meine Olympiade. Ein Amateur, vier Jahre, 80 Disziplinen

(My Personal Olympiad. One amateur's experience of 80 disciplines in four years, to be published in May 2016 by S. Fischer.)

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My First Triathlon

“Why are you so happy?” Diogenes asked a young man. “I was victorious in Olympia,” the young man replied proudly. “I beat all my rivals!” “Where is the honour,” Diogenes retorted, “in beating those weaker than yourself?”

Having woken before dawn, I didn't think I was nervous until it occurred to me in Cape Town city centre, less than a quarter of an hour after setting off, that I'd left my bike at home. I had to drive back (no bike, no triathlon) and turn around again immediately, very late and keenly aware of my jangling nerves. I raced north up the dead-straight highway towards Langebaan at 100 miles per hour, Table Mountain like a stamp on a postcard in my rear-view mirror. It was eight a.m. by now and hot already; the start was scheduled for eleven. I sensed I'd be sweating well before then.

My first sight of the other competitors was sobering, and not just because of their high-performance bikes. Here was a bunch of young, highly trained athletes with negative body fat percentages, powerful calves and bulging thighs. The juniors were in the middle of their race. The announcer introduced some of these ten to fourteen year olds, one of them world champion in his age group; they leaped off their bikes like pros before they'd even reached the transition zone, and pushed them at a run to their stands. It was all so impressively smooth. The presence of many relatives and friends gave the place a boisterous, fairground feel. Many in the crowd knew each other and were chatting. It looked to me like a secret society, good-natured and comradely. I was wrong.

After the announcement I started warming up: twenty minutes cycling and a quarter of an hour running at a leisurely pace. Then I pulled on my wetsuit and was surprised to find that it wouldn't quite fit properly. The water was a nice temperature; a few cheery holidaymakers were swimming nearby. Their Saturday splashing struck me as frivolous. We were called into the conference room for the competition instructions. A man tapped me on the shoulder. "Hey mate, why did you put your wetsuit on the wrong way round?" Shame shot through my veins, especially as I realised what a ridiculous figure I cut among all these finely tuned athletes. How was I supposed to answer? "Because I'm a moron! Because I was too busy watching people like you?" Or should I say: "There's worse: I left my bike at home too." I stammered that I found it more comfortable this way. The man cast me a look of excommunication. I waited until he'd turned round and ran into the toilets. Doing up the zip behind my back proved difficult, but the suit now fitted much better. I really should have practised putting it on.

We were called to the launch pad. I hadn't given a second's thought to where I should position myself for the start of the swim. When the horn went and the rope dropped down in front of us, I realised in a matter of seconds to my horror how stupid I'd been to line up in the front row. The participants in the Western Province Triathlon Championships didn't take long, gentle strokes to get going; they paddled and jabbed like fish snapping for titbits strewn on the surface. I was shoved underwater from behind, and sharks converged on and over me from both sides. I went under, swallowed water as I tried to breathe, and stopped swimming. As I spluttered and got back underway I realised that the pack had already raced off. Although we were swimming in a lagoon, the water grew choppy and the waves were big enough to disrupt my rhythm and prevent me from breathing easily. What's more, I kept having to break off my swimming to keep an eye out for the next buoy. At one point I was heading for the wrong buoy before I was redirected by a lifesaver in a kayak. I climbed out of the water last, but at least there were two other racers still in sight up ahead of me. Despite feeling slightly dazed, I ran as fast as I could to the transition area because the track was lined with spectators and I didn't

want to embarrass myself in front of them the way I had with the athletes. I wasn't aware that there were spectators standing around the transition area too and they were greatly entertained by my clumsy attempts to peel off the wetsuit (something else I hadn't practised). Worse still, the announcer decided to take me under his wing. First he congratulated me on my swimming time, making an incomprehensible hash of my name. I imagine that he was merely in a good mood or paid good money to exude good cheer, but to my ears his voice dripped with scorn. When a gust of wind tore from my fingers the start number I was meant to fasten to my belly, the string fell to the ground and I scuttled panting after the plastic bib, I heard him say, "That's right. Take your time, E-lai-jah." And I thought I heard the spectators laugh. I hated him with a hatred I had only otherwise felt for Stalin and a sadistic teacher at boarding school. I eventually managed to tame my bib and push my bike out of the area. I struggled up the rise towards the main road, driven by a desire to get away from mankind - or at least its representatives in Langebaan - as fast as possible. The course consisted of three loops along the main road to a roundabout and back. The traffic had been diverted. No sooner had I got into my rhythm than I was lapped by one of the Formula 1 bikes. The athlete was bent low in his saddle like a statue, churning his seven-league pedals. The race leader was moving at such speed that I heard barely a hiss before, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him flash past. The advantage of our difference in speed was that I didn't need to worry about illegally riding in his slipstream. My mountain bike had thin tyres and limited aspirations. However, it was hard work negotiating the gentle but constant six-kilometre climb into a stiff headwind. I leaned forward too, my eyes glued to the flickering yellow line beneath me. My thoughts dwindled with every mile ... until they flew into a panic when I grasped for my water bottle and encountered only fresh air. I'd left it behind in my frantic early morning rush. Forty kilometres in this heat without drinking - without the ghost of a shadow along the entire course - would have been a superhuman feat. At the end of the first lap I spotted a filling station. I turned off, jumped from my bike and rushed into a small shop. Two fat Boers were standing at the counter, each clutching a six-pack. They stared at me, their

facial expressions inscrutable. I couldn't be sure that we came from the same planet. "A drink," I screamed. "I haven't got any money, but I need a drink. I'll pay you later." The till attendant looked at me just as expressionlessly for an infinite amount of time until she finally deigned to nod slowly to me. I opened the fridge and grabbed the first drink that came to hand. I took a big swig on my way out; a truck honked furiously. The headwind grew stronger on the last lap. I was overtaken by a woman, the only person I had so far managed to overtake. Fifty metres from the entrance to the transition area I swung myself off my bike to make a better impression during my second change of clothes, and glided, to my mind very elegantly, into the circle. By now my arms and thighs had turned a dangerous shade of red. So I rubbed on some cream, which was clearly an absurd thing to do in this place of rapid metamorphosis, but by some blessing the announcer was busy calling out the names of the athletes who were just crossing the finish line with astronomically fast times. As he did this, I tried to put on my running shoes. My feet categorically refused to go in. I thought they must have swollen up with the effort, so I pulled on my cycling shoes again. (The next day my partner asked me whether I'd seen her running shoes, which were the same make as mine.)

The running course was a two-kilometre circuit, and we had to do five laps. After one lap a woman under a large parasol gave us an elastic band. At the finish line the four bands on our wrists would be proof that we'd completed the prescribed ten kilometres. No sooner had I entered the circuit than the woman tried to slip a band onto my wrist, assuming that I'd already done one lap. It was one of those moments in life when you surpass yourself. Even though it was terribly hot, even though I was feeling pretty groggy (my pulse was 160), even though cycling shoes are not really ideal for running, and even though the idea of having to do only eight rather than ten kilometres seemed more enticing than any other sin, something inside me resisted the temptation and I refused the gift. "I'm proud of you," the woman called after me.

The most difficult thing about the running was the uneven course, not only in terms of the gradients but of the surface too: one moment asphalt, the next gravel, then paving slabs. It was the first time in my life that I'd run such

an uneven course. I couldn't find any kind of rhythm. My pulse wouldn't slow down. I had to negotiate the steepest climb at a walk. In my grouchy ill temper I cursed the beautiful surroundings - hills sea birds -, longing only for peace and rest. Encouragement, though, came from the camaraderie of the other runners who shouted "Well done!" even as they lapped me, and the generous support of the spectators, who clapped even my efforts, although I was last by a long distance. And then there was the chubby man standing on top of his garage at the end of the steep hill who called out fervent observations on my increasingly feeble endeavours. We almost became friends. He begged me once not to give up, another time he taunted me about wanting to walk to the finish, next he urged me to prove how tough I was, then he offered me a beer, and the next time he scolded me for taking a slight shortcut when turning at the harbour mole. Even the woman handing out water waited until the end for me, poured ice-cold water over my head and ran alongside me for a few paces while praising me to the skies. If my teachers at school had been like that, I'd be a Nobel Prize winner by now. She followed me through to the finish line, and we later exchanged a few words. She told me that she'd done her first triathlon the year before and had also finished last. "But you know," she said, "if there's one thing in life you never have to be ashamed of coming last in, it's a triathlon." The announcer tried again to pronounce my name, with no greater success. I ran down the hill to the line, the sea before me, and hopped the final metres on one leg, finishing in a time - the announcer said - of 3 hours 45 minutes (I'd actually calculated that I'd have to make 3 hours 30, but if I counted every involuntary break I hadn't missed by much). Afterwards I drank a cup of coke. Virtually all the competitors had already left. All alone, I pushed my bike back to the car, drained, suffused with a sense of pride I'd never felt before. As I pushed the key into the ignition I looked forward to the bath and limitless stock of cold drinks at home. I turned the key and heard nothing but total silence. I'd left the headlights on. Even pushing the car didn't help. I had to call the AA, the vehicle breakdown service. Since Langebaan was a little remote, the woman on the phone warned me that I'd have to wait for up to two hours. I jumped on my bike and rode to the filling station at a leisurely pace to settle

my debts and buy three litres of water. A security guard took pity on me when he saw me lying on the asphalt in the shadow of my car, and returned with an elderly man, who parked his Honda next to my jeep, swapped the batteries, started the engine and then swapped them back; a simple solution that had never occurred to me in my forty years of life. I drove home along the highway beside the deep-blue ocean. A beautiful Kate Bush song was playing on the radio. All of a sudden I was flooded with such an all-embracing, boundless sense of happiness that I got goose bumps. It was then that I realised that it really doesn't matter if you finish first or last. Nobody could ever experience a greater surge of joy – not even the Olympic gold medal winner.

Four Years of Allympics

In the summer of 2012, like billions of other earthlings, I was slumped in front of my television, watching competitions in sporting disciplines whose existence I would never have heard of were it not for the Olympic Games every four years. I followed shapely individuals as they pranced around, sizing each other up, cut a fine figure astride a spruce-looking horse, or shot high into the air to pull off a variety of somersaults and twists. I saw people strain and dislocate many parts of their bodies; I witnessed unimaginable feats of stamina. I watched everything – heats and qualifiers, semi-finals and, of course, the finals – with a certain fascination, yet with the nagging feeling that something fundamental was passing me by.

The longer I watched the more my dissatisfaction grew. What I saw on my screen appeared either too easy or too difficult. The movements had on the one hand a self-evident grace to them, yet on the other an incomprehensible complexity. I couldn't figure out what the athletes' performances meant: those numbers (and there was certainly no lack of numbers) remained abstract. Questions about how and why flashed through my mind, but only rarely were they answered. Quite the contrary: a perfectly executed punch, push or throw stood like an exclamation mark at the end of a story of which I knew nothing. The acrobatic virtuosity obscured the many years of toil that had gone before. Absolute mastery is obviously the tiny tip of the iceberg. At the Olympics sport is presented as a slick, immaculate product that has been refined to impossible, inaccessible heights, and is to be consumed in gawping passivity.

There is a long tradition of alienating sport from the common people. Back at the beginning, in ancient Greece, the men who took part in the contests were pilgrims who had travelled to the shrine at Olympia to worship the gods, trusting in the fertility that had been characteristic of this region since time immemorial. Over the years the pilgrimage site became bigger, and the contests increasingly regulated, until the only competitors were selected athletes who had prepared for this showdown for years in their homeland. Specialists seized control of sport. There has been a similar development with

regard to the Olympic Games in the modern era. Hand in hand, economisation and professionalization created an elite event that was disconnected from the sporting masses.

I was fascinated by the Olympic Games from an early age, which might be linked to the fact that I roamed Munich in the summer of 1972, a child refugee caught up in the general excitement, drinking in live every event that was open to the public. Bernd Kannenberg approached with dynamic strides, and the crowd clapped; cyclists sped past me, and the crowd cheered; Bernd Kannenberg fast-walked towards his legendary victory, hips wobbling. I even managed to sneak into one of the stadiums (of which more later). It was to prove a lasting fascination. Years later I would still spread out all my toys in my bedroom and stage my own competitions in invented disciplines that obeyed rules of my own devising. The sporting venues were made from Mikado sticks, ludo boards and Meccano building blocks, and the athletes came from two Monopoly sets (one English, one German). One day the two hats ran a head-to-head race. The Olympic Games were a fairground to me, with a different exciting, exhilarating show being performed in every tent; for me, sport had more to do with theatre than competition, with language than statistics. Another reason for my enthusiasm might have been that my parents were both competitive athletes – my father a hurdler, my mother a volleyball player – or that I was sent as a young boy to a British boarding school called Kenton College in Kenya, where we did sport every afternoon. Perhaps I owe this interest of mine to an early, unreflective intuition that man can fulfil his multifarious yearnings in sport, and plumb his personal ambition and social skills to the full. As a lifelong sports fan, both active (above all tennis) and passive (above all athletics), I sat in front of the television that summer and asked myself: What is the attraction of these sports? What do they reveal about us as humans? And: How would I go about them?

My questions went unanswered of course. Instead, one awards ceremony followed the other. As the flag was run up again and the anthem played, the anecdote about Diogenes I quoted by way of introduction popped into my

mind. During the coronation rituals there was little sense of the “emphatic truth of gesture in the important moments of life” (Baudelaire), for all the winners’ emotion. Even during the contests, the commentators focused exclusively on who was going to win. They didn’t even bother to explain why the top three finishers were honoured rather than the first five, for example, or all the finalists. Someone was always “in the lead”; sometimes there was a “comeback”, occasionally a “show of strength”, and now a “clear”, next a “surprising” or a “sensational”, but always a “victory” (which is what makes it so easy to follow sports broadcasts in a foreign language, provided you know the athletes’ names). Sport was boiled down to one single aspect, though one which generally seemed irrelevant to me, as I knew none of the competing kayakers, archers or weightlifters, and therefore didn’t really care who won. I felt like a master decorator watching paint dry. The richness of the human imagination, which fashions every sport into a living work of art, was reduced to a simple binary code: thumbs up or thumbs down. There was barely a mention of the choreography of events, the socio-political purpose of the rules, the physics of the movements, and the biology of exertion. Instead, the intrusive Olympic marching song of the branding brigades pounded away in the background: *The sponsor takes it all*.

Where does this cult of victory come from, this obsession with the number of triumphs? Why is it of such existential importance to an athlete whether he wins six or seven golds? Why does it matter whether such-and-such a country in the Far East won eleven rather than its nine medals last time around? The oft-invoked tragedy of the competitive sportsman is not that he loses, but that he *almost* wins or *just* loses. Commentators dine on the drama of the close finish in exuberant tones and with operatic spasms. Yet a defeat that is measured in the blink of an eye could just as easily be regarded as null and void. To accord such importance to a hundredth of a second or a millimetre (especially after a contest lasting several hours) trivialises the beauty of the very activity the Olympic Games are supposed to be celebrating: sport.

“Taking part is everything!” That is the sloppy hand-me-down version of the most famous statement by the man who rekindled the Olympic movement, Pierre de Coubertin. His actual words in London in 1908 were: “*L’important dans ces Olympiades, c’est moins d’y gagner que d’y prendre part.*” (“The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part.”) He went on to add: “*L’important dans la vie, ce n’est pas le triomphe, mais le combat; l’essential n’est pas d’avoir vaincu, mais de s’être bien battu.*” (“The important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle; the essential thing is not to have conquered, but to have fought well.”) It is well known that prophets go unrecognised by their own religion; though regularly invoked, these words ring empty and false in the teeth of reality. Not only the victories, but the athletes’ placings are minutely analysed and assessed, measured and treasured, and funding and investment are tied to them. The medals table is the Olympic testament. The second equally famous creed – “*citius, altius, fortius*” (faster, higher, stronger), as formulated by the Dominican priest Henri Didon – symbolises a logic of growth that has perverted sport in so many ways – not just doping, but also spiralling standards that can prove too much even for the professionals. Is it truly heroic for an athlete to sacrifice ten years of his or her life in pursuit of an extra ten seconds? “Ever upward” as a spiritual exercise, measured not in minutes or metres but in experience and insight, has been forgotten.