



# SPRINT, PEDAL AND PADDLE

THE ABU DHABI INTERNATIONAL TRIATHLON COMES TO THE CAPITAL THIS MONTH AND THE BATTLE LINES HAVE BEEN DRAWN. FROM AMATEURS TO MEDAL-WINNING SPORTS STARS, ALL WILL BE FREE-WHEELING, SPLASHING AND POUNDING THE PAVEMENT IN THIS SPORTING SPECTACULAR

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

**The cheers erupting from the crowd** will be spurring the competitors on to greater heights in Abu Dhabi this month, with elite athletes flocking to the Capital to compete in the fifth Abu Dhabi International Triathlon organised by Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority (TCA).

The Abu Dhabi International Triathlon is the pinnacle triathlon race in the region – and the largest – designed to showcase the best of Abu Dhabi. It starts with a sea swim in the turquoise waters of the Arabian Gulf off Abu Dhabi's blue-flagged public beach, before heading onto the bike course, which weaves through the tree-lined streets of Abu Dhabi, crossing Saadiyat Island on the way to Yas Island. Here, athletes cycle around the Yas Marina Circuit, home of the penultimate race of the F1 season, before returning to the vibrant Corniche to sprint over the line. ⇒



"This is not a typical triathlon. As a tourism entity, when we established the race we decided to make it a long race," explains Faisal Al Sheikh, director of the Events Bureau of TCA. The objective was to make the event stand out – without doubt a feat that's been achieved. "We wanted it to be a dynamic course to incentivise people to come, and more and more people are taking part," Al Sheikh reports.

This year, the organisers are anticipating around 2,400 entries, representing a 25 percent increase. It's ambitious, but the growth since inception backs-up the figures. With a record number of entries, it's shaping up to be a sports spectacular. "More people are getting involved every year," Al Sheikh confirms. "The course itself is very appealing, but what really makes it a great experience is that elite athletes and amateurs compete together. This is a great dream, for amateurs to be part of this elite field."

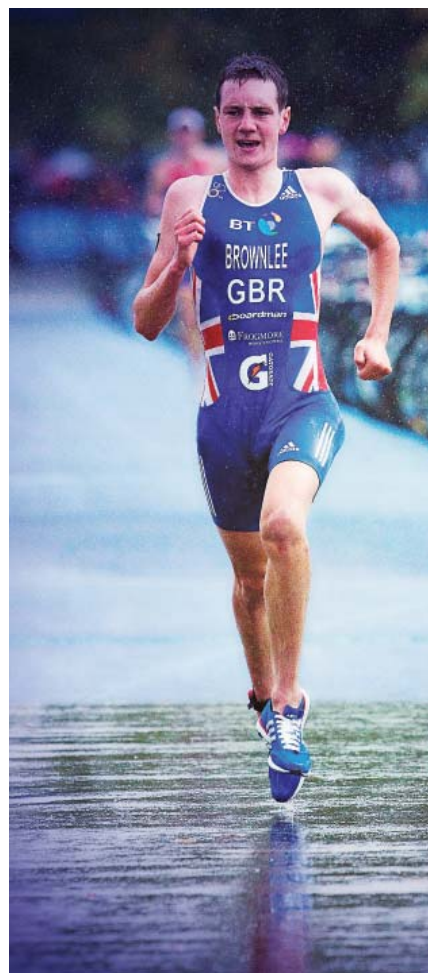
A drawcard for any triathlete is the opportunity to rub shoulders with the world's best sportspeople. The field is always highly competitive and this year is no exception – Olympic gold medallist Alistair Brownlee, brother Jonathan Brownlee and local crowd favourite, Omar Nour will be going head to head in the short course, while 2013 Ironman World Champion, Frederik Van Lierde will be defending his title in the long course, hoping to secure a hat-trick.

"Abu Dhabi holds a special place in my heart as the event was the springboard for me to go on and become World Champion. The triathlon, the city and the people always welcome me with open arms," says Van Lierde. "This year, I hope to claim my third Abu Dhabi victory. I know that a win in Abu Dhabi can push me to new heights."

In the elite women's course, current champion Melissa Hauschildt will be squaring up to 2013 runner-up Caroline Steffen, along with other international talent. Hauschildt is widely regarded as one of the top female athletes, on fine form last season. "This will be my third time racing in Abu Dhabi and I'm really excited. It's an amazingly unique race that attracts the best of the best. Being defending

**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Omar Nour prepares for the swimming leg.

**THIS PAGE FROM TOP LEFT:** Alistair Brownlee is returning as defending champion of the short course; Omar Nour and Alistair Brownlee square off; participants race towards the water; Omar Nour on the Circuit at Yas Marina.



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champ I know I'll have a target on my back and with a super-strong field it's going to be a tough race, but I'll be ready," says Hauschildt. Steffen will be looking for any opportunity to demote Hauschildt from the podium. "This is the fifth time in a row I'm making my way to Abu Dhabi to race one of the toughest races on the triathlon circuit. After several podium places, I'm still missing out on gold, which I hope to secure in this year's [event]. I'm looking forward to racing against one of the strongest female professional fields ever," Steffen enthuses.

Alistair Brownlee is taking a more relaxed approach to the competition in the men's short course. "Ah, I've not actually seen a start list, I've got to be honest," he confesses. "Jonny's obviously racing," he says of his brother. "So is training partner Rhys Davey, so I know it will be competitive." While the brothers are rivals in racing terms, they are less competitive in training. "We know that training together gives us both massive advantages. In key sessions it's great having someone of similar ability to keep the pressure on, but when it comes to the run, all bets are off," Brownlee declares.

Brownlee had an injury-laden season in 2013, but he's now ready to take on the field. It's not the gold medal that's boosting his confidence, though, it's familiarity. "Last year was a bit of the unknown but I know what to expect this year and that is giving me confidence because I know how to prepare for it," he says.

"I did a little extra on the bike last year, so I can shave a few minutes off there. I'll race as I usually do, and if I beat the record that's great, but first and foremost I want to win the race," Brownlee adds. Omar Nour explains that Brownlee got lost on the bike for two kilometres in last year's event. "He still came back and beat everybody. He is in a league of his own," says Nour. "I think I'm going to win," he adds with a cheeky grin. "Maybe he'll get lost again, you just never know. Anything can happen. Is it probable? No, but is it possible? Yes. It's not over until it's completely over; you just have to keep at it."

It's this indefatigable spirit that makes Nour a fierce competitor. He's a bundle of energy as he relates his fat to fit story and late arrival into the triathlon scene. "I turned pro at 31. People usually go long-distance or retire at that age. I'm still doing short distance and trying to go to the Olympics," he declares. Nour's equal passion is as a motivator. "Last year before the triathlon, we went to a school to do a little pep talk and one girl went and signed up and ended up winning," he says proudly.

In 2013, more than 90 children turned up at Abu Dhabi Corniche for the inaugural Kids Duathlon, leading to TCA joining forces with health insurance company Daman to expand the event this year. "Our aim is largely to get the community involved – this is particularly so with the kids' race. We want to encourage them to get active and stay healthy, and based on the

success of last year's duathlon we decided to expand it to a full triathlon this year. We're expecting 500 entries," Al Sheikh outlines.

10-year old Mia Baxter-Elliot has been training hard in preparation. "It's my second time. I did pretty well last year but it was my first duathlon, so I wasn't as prepared as I could have been," she says seriously. "I am doing swimming four times a week and I'm trying to run at least 24 kilometres a day if I have time."

Mia and mother Kim found inspiration on television. "We were watching a triathlon and there was this man who had no legs and he was doing it. It inspired me and my mum to do it as well," she explains earnestly. And will she win? "I think I have a chance," she giggles. "Maybe."

Perhaps it's this, the idea that anyone can win, that makes the Abu Dhabi International Triathlon perpetually exciting. "The ones to watch this year are definitely the returning champs, but new champions can also grow from the event," says Al Sheikh.

Race enjoyment is not only in victory. "The triathlon is hands-down one of the best experiences you'll ever have," says Nour. "You're swimming on the Corniche. The water's perfect – not too warm, not too cold. Then, when you cycle, you go to Yas Island and do a lap around the track, which is unbelievable. You come back into town and run on the Corniche. It's the only triathlon of that scale. It behooves people to take that opportunity to be part of it."

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**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** The Brownlee brothers train and compete together; Melissa Hauschildt prepares to cycle past the Yas Viceroy Hotel; the swimming leg hits the Arabian Gulf.

IMAGES: Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority, Ryan Bowd & XX Group