

THE X-FACTOR

Ian Leitch always knew he was a decent runner and fast on the bike but it was only after a 13,000-mile cycling adventure that he decided to make the most of his natural abilities

The term 'late bloomer' applies to few athletes as pertinently as it does to Ian Leitch. He became a professional on the XTERRA circuit at the end of 2009, aged 34, and since then he has been putting his maturity to scorching effect in the XTERRA World Tour. So the obvious question is: what took him so long?

"I was 5ft 3ins when I was 16, and I grew really late," he says simply. "Because I was small, I probably had a bit more potential than I realised. When I started running again [in his late teens], I thought, I can really run, this is nice."

It was in the 1980s when Leitch first realised his running ability was above average, and he was spurred on by watching British greats Seb Coe, Steve Cram and Steve Ovett. Around this time he joined a swimming club and got his first bike.

"When I look back I suppose it all adds up to explain what I'm doing now. When I was a kid, I had a BMX and I turned the bars backwards so I could ride longer distances. Then mountain bikes came along; I got my first mountain bike in '87 or '88."

So that was the spark, but it was many years before Leitch could take competition seriously. He went to university, took part in a few amateur mountain bike races ("nothing serious") and "spent the whole of my early 20s smoking and drinking heavily". It was not until he got a job and quit smoking that Leitch became more keenly involved in cycling – still only at "good amateur" level. Equally surprising is that his transformation from weekend warrior into elite triathlete was kick-started not by knuckling down to serious training but by taking a very long holiday.

"Five years ago, I did a big bicycle tour that made me much stronger. I did the same ride as Mark Beaumont [author of *The Man Who Cycled the World*], only the other way around, from southern Argentina to Alaska."

This 13,000-mile adventure boosted Leitch's confidence in his cycling ability, and soon after returning he decided to find out whether he could still run fast. On a whim, and without having trained, he

entered a 10K road race. Lining up in his baggy grey T-shirt, he was a source of amusement for many club runners, until the gun went and he left most of them behind.

"I was going to see my granny and the race was en route," he recalls, "So I ran it, almost won it, and thought, 'Jeez, I can really run, this is great.'"

Knowing that you can cycle and run well is one thing, but it takes more than that knowledge to convince a 34-year-old to turn professional.

"Last winter, I was in the right position with my job [IT sales executive]; I'm a certain age and haven't got a family; the economy was crap; I had some savings; I knew I could really run and I'd become much better on the bike. Without taking it too seriously, I fancied a new challenge."

WHAT IS XTERRA?

The XTERRA World Tour is a series of off-road triathlons held at beautiful and challenging locations across the globe, and its \$458,000 (£290,000) prize pot attracts some of the best athletes in the world. Each race consists of a 1500m swim, 32-34K MTB and 10K run. The World Championships are held in Maui, Hawaii, every October. Visit xterraplanet.com.

Leitch half-jokingly pulls himself up for speaking arrogantly about his objectives, but what actually comes across is a love of competition that outweighs any fear of defeat. This calmness is perhaps a psychological edge that older athletes – with life experience and careers to fall back on – have over their younger counterparts.

"I thought, 'I'd love to get a top-10 finish in XTERRA, that'd be a really nice feeling,'" he says, "You have to try not to kid yourself because you could end up looking like an idiot."

He finished eighth at his first XTERRA World Tour race, in South Africa, in February last year, and followed it up with third place in the Czech Republic, in July, and a win in Japan the following month.

In the meantime, he made light work of beating his friend Sam Gardner to take the British Cross Triathlon title. What most astounded Leitch about his success in these races was that his running and cycling were strong enough to make up the two to four minutes he lost in the water owing to a lack of swimming preparation.

"I thought, 'Wow, I'm right in the mix here, despite swimming like an amateur.'"

Leitch's training schedule now includes a high volume of swimming – up to 5K per session – as well as plenty of interval cycling and running workouts.

"There is no typical training week; it depends on racing and travelling. Some weeks I'll have a big chunk – 22 hours, which has all sorts of hideous elements."

The toughest session he describes is a series of bike intervals: six 20-minute reps, alternating between above-lactate-threshold and tempo pace, bookended by two 45-minute rides at steady pace.

Leitch is coached by Dr Garry Palmer (sportstest.co.uk), with whom he consults on an almost daily basis. Palmer's assessment of Leitch's fitness revealed a remarkable VO₂ max of 86ml/kg/min. Despite this genetic blessing, he was advised to reduce the intensity of his aerobic training ("much, much slower") – a change that both coach and athlete believe is paying dividends.

A tentative hope for one or two creditable performances in XTERRA has rapidly evolved into a hunger for outright domination. Having professionalised his training, with a top physiologist on board, Leitch is set up for a strong, not to mention age-defying, 2011 season. What will be the focus of his campaign?

"I want to do XTERRA again but also give road triathlons a try."

Provided he attracts sponsorship, Leitch will compete in the Ironman 70.3 World Series, as well as racing in the XTERRA World Tour. "Looking at current Ironman 70.3 results, I think I can live with almost everybody on the run, certainly on the bike, and as for the swim, well, I've only recently quadrupled my training."

WORDS: DAVID BRADFORD; PHOTO: MIKE ADRIAN/XTERRA PHOTOS



TRAIN & RACE LIKE A PRO

Ian Leitch's top tips for all-terrain domination

1 OBEY PAIN During hard sessions, always listen to your body. If your body is crumbling, stop. If your head is crumbling, keep going.

2 BIKE SMOOTHLY The key to mountain biking is riding smoothly. Aggressive riding and slamming through sections invariably leads to mechanical problems, punctures and time losses. The fastest people often look slow because they are so smooth.

3 DON'T PANIC If something goes wrong, stay calm; there is usually time to claw back lost minutes. You can quickly go from feeling terrible to enjoying the race again.

4 BE HAPPY Enjoy everything around you, even if you are giving it the max. There is nothing worse than an overly competitive, aggressive person who seems to have forgotten the main reason for being in such a great place.

5 SAY CHEERS At the finish, thank the marshals; it's such a basic thing to do, but it matters. Finally, drink beer – you've gotta replenish those carbs.