

Berkel, Keat Defend Their Titles at Challenge Copenhagen

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Aussies Tim Berkel and Rebekah Keat successfully defended their titles in Denmark today, but while Keat easily took the crown, Berkel had his work cut out for him from the start. While last year's inaugural event saw rain, wind and extremely cold weather, this year's race featured near-perfect conditions, with overcast skies, calm winds and temperate temperatures in the mid-60s.

In the men's race, Great Britain's Stephen Bayliss started things off with a speedy 45:22-minute 3.8K swim, putting him just slightly ahead of Dane Fredrik Seistrup and Sweden's Bjorn Andersson. Uber-biker Andersson passed Bayliss and Seistrup early on, and quickly began turning the big gears, inching minute upon minute in front of Bayliss, Seistrup, local favorite Jimmy Johnsen and Berkel. With Andersson powering through through the Danish countryside and Bayliss the only one even remotely close on his tail, the pro men began in earnest to use whatever they could find for speed. In Bayliss' case, this meant a four-minute penalty for accidentally drafting off a motorbike. A small group eventually formed behind Bayliss and Andersson, and among those penalized included eventual winner Berkel, who said at the finish line he thought the penalty meant his day was over. "I felt it was a bit of an unfair call," Berkel said. "I planned on fighting it when I got off the bike."

By the time Berkel landed in T2, he was in fourth place and more than 16 minutes down on Andersson and his frustration took over. Instead of entering the four-minute penalty box in the transition area, Berkel soldiered on at a fast clip—with a race referee following close behind him. Berkel was eventually caught and agreed to sit out his four minutes, but he admitted later he wasn't exactly quiet about it. "I was cussing an stomping around a bit," laughed Berkel. "But then when it was over I just went out really hard."

By the first 13K of the four-loop run through downtown Copenhagen, Berkel had ran his way to second place and had gained six minutes on Andersson. But Johnsen was also making a strong move for the win, and by the 30K mark Andersson had been passed, and Berkel and Johnsen quickly began battling it out as they circled the city. At the 38K mark the two were running side-by-side as swarms of spectators cheered, but in the last kilometer Berkel seized the moment and surged ahead toward the finish line beneath the capital's beautiful parliament building. "This is my first time defending a title, and it's just an indescribable feeling," Berkel said after his 8:11:15 finish. "It's hard to know that had I not had that penalty I probably would have beat my own time by more than a minute, but then again it proves that in iron-distance racing you just never know what can happen."

Women's defending champion Rebekah Keat didn't have the race-day drama her fellow title winner had, instead she would hold her lead for much of the day and cross the line with a new course record of 8:52:42.

According to Keat, she can at least thank part of her win to her fellow Team TBB teammate Jodie Swallow. The British super-swimmer exited the water first in the women's race—and in fourth-place overall—in a slick time of 46:34. Keat exited in third-place a few minutes later, but quickly passed second-out-of-the-water Ann Sophie Claire Lonnberg of Denmark. By the 60K mark Keat broke through to the lead, with Lonnberg and Swallow closely behind. "I paced with Jodie the whole time," said Keat. "Without her having been there I simply would not have gone as fast." Keat continued to build minutes on her competition, entering T2 18 minutes ahead of Lonnberg and fellow Danes Karina Ottosen and Asa Lundstrom. Swallow entered T2 shortly after Keat, but was visibly hurting due to a still-healing foot injury, and she dropped out of the race soon after. "She raced so well, it was so good to have her out there and although she knew from the beginning she was hurt and would have to start and see how it went, it's still a shame she couldn't continue," Keat said.

With her nearest competition far behind her, there was nothing left for Keat to do but work on building her gap—and so she did. "My legs just felt so great the whole time today," Keat said. The Aussie also said the enormous crowd helped keep her speeding along. "This has got to be the best race crowd in the world!" she exclaimed at the finish line. All told, Keat managed to secure a whopping 43-minute lead on second-place finisher Lundstrom, who finished three minutes ahead of German Linda Schuecker in 9:35:31. "I think Challenge Roth is my favorite race, but this race is really a close second now," Keat said.

Challenge Copenhagen, Aug. 14, 2011

Copenhagen, Denmark

3.8K swim, 180K bike, 42.2K run

Men

1. Tim Berkel (AUS) 8:11:15
2. Jimmy Johnsen (DEN) 8:11:50
3. Dejan Patrcevic (CRO) 8:12:18
4. Mads Vittrup-Pedersen (DEN) 8:13:21
5. Esben Hovgaard (DEN) 8:21:07

Women

1. Rebekah Keat (AUS) 8:52:42
2. Asa Lundstrom (DEN) 9:35:31
3. Linda Schuecker (GER) 9:38:15
4. Karina Orrosen (DEN) 9:42:59
5. Helene Pallesen (DEN) 9:45:54

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