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Berkel, Johnsen ready for Copenhagen

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COPENHAGEN, Denmark -- On the eve of the second Challenge Copenhagen men's elite contest, defending champion Tim Berkel of Australia and rising Danish star Jimmy Johnsen are confident about their chances against the likes of Bjorn Andersson, Stephen Bayliss, and Keegan Williams.

Berkel is from Port Macquairie, Australia and in 2008 at the age of 24 he became one of the youngest Australian Ironman winners by taking the title at Ironman Western Australia in Busselton. Last year he erased the one hit wonder title with his impressive 8:07:42 win at the inaugural Ironman-distance Challenge Copenhagen.

This year he had a tough start at Abu Dhabi where he DNF'd. He quickly recovered momentum with second place finishes at the Port Macquairie and Busselton 70.3s, then took 3rd at Challenge Cairns. Last year at Copenhagen Berkel stormed to the lead on a rainy bike and held off all comers with a 2:49 run.

Johnsen, a 33-year-old from Farum, Copenhagen, has started to emerge from the shadow of Rasmus Henning with his win at Challenge Barcelona last October. Johnsen might have been on the podium last year at Copenhagen, but he had to contend with three flats that left him 13th at the end of the bike and a stellar 2:43 run could only bring him back to 6th at the end.



TIM BERKEL

Slowlitch: How has your season gone?

Tim Berkel: My season's been pretty funny. I started the year in Abu Dhabi where I went in feeling pretty fit. But I actually got smacked around by the heat and the wind and the pace on the bike. It was fast, fast, fast and it really hurt me and I dropped out. Then I came back to Australia and redeemed myself. I was 2nd in Port Macquairie 70.3 and at a 70.3 Busselton six days later.

ST: What did you run at those two 70.3 races?

Tim: At Port Macquairie I ran 1:15 and at Busselton I ran 1:13 high. So that was good. Then I did the inaugural Challenge Cairns, a full Iron distance race and I was third there. Macca won and Matty White was second.

ST: Sad to see Macca was dead last and dropped out in London.

Tim: I heard he was a bit injured. I think he had a bit of a hamstring problem. If he's good, he can get the ITU racing down.

ST: Nobody met the Australian Olympic qualifying criteria yet (Top 3), so technically you may be right. But watching him at London doesn't give much hope.

Tim: Growing up I remember watching him doing Ironman. It was a bit sad to watch him do the shorter stuff lately. At Challenge Cairns, he was fast [McCormack won in 8:15:56 with a 12:40 margin over Matty White]. He did not train but he came out and killed it. I'm sure he will do well in the future ITU races.

ST: What did you do next?

Tim: After Cairns I came to the States. I was supposed to race Rhode Island 70.3, but when I got to Baltimore my flight got canceled, so I had to come back. I did Racine 70.3 and got second. So that's it so far. I've had some downs but there's been some good races as well.

ST: Who's your coach?

Tim: My coach is Grant Giles. He is based in Lennox Head, Australia on the Gold Coast. He used to be a big pro back in the day. He had half a dozen top 10s at Ironman Australia and has done Hawaii many times. We have a good relationship and I've learned a lot from him.

ST: When you won Copenhagen, was this breakthrough for you?

Tim: It showed I wasn't a one hit wonder -- two years after my win at Ironman Western Australia in 2008.

ST: You've been based in Boulder for two American summers now.

Tim: I've been in Boulder for six weeks now. Whenever I am in Boulder I always seem to knuckle down and train real hard. I was very fit and pretty primed for this race last year.

ST: Is that a sign Boulder is boring and there is nothing else to do there?

Tim: No. I struggle with the altitude and I have to work really hard. I think when I come down to sea level it feels good for me.

ST: Why do you like this race?

Tim: I really enjoy the course. It isn't a boring out and back. It was real technical, there were a lot of corners and it was fast. I was doing a lot of bike racing in Colorado and I did a lot of crits [criterium-style bike races]. Compared to these guys I race here, I went really good on the corners and I managed to get away and put on some time. I'm really looking forward to getting back out there on the weekend.



JIMMY JOHNSEN

ST: Tell us about your breakthrough win last year.

Jimmy Johnsen: At Challenge Barcelona last October we went to tactics. I took it easy on the bike so I could run well. It did not look like I could win but I came out to the front with 5k to go.

ST: What about that course led you to that strategy?

Jimmy: The run course is definitely not fast in Barcelona. It is flat, a long out and back. We had a tailwind going out and as tough headwind coming back. And it was quite warm - 25 degrees [Celsius, low 80s Fahrenheit]. I was about 6 or 8 minutes faster than anyone else. The main thing about that race was that my pace was the same the whole way. So I did not have to slow down at the end. I ran a 2:53, pretty much faster than the rest of the field. [Johnsen finished in 8:19:43, 34 seconds ahead of Horst Reichl of Germany].

ST: Last year here in the heavy rain, sharp rocks gave you flats?

Jimmy: Yes. The thing about that course is that after big rains there are tiny stones in the pavement called flint stones that come to the surface. It's only on Denmark roads. They are sharp as a razor blade and they cut into the tires. I had two flats - one after 15k and one after 70k. I got a third one with 200 meters to go so the last one I rode in on the wheel.

ST: Any strategy for this year? It's been raining a lot.

Jimmy: This year I am better prepared for it. I changed tire sponsor to Continental. Their Grand Prix 4000 is really good and resists flats.

ST: Does it take a heavy rain to bring them out? Or can the slightest sprinkle make them arise?

Jimmy: A light rain can do it as well. But a heavy rain also brings all the gravel off the side of the road. They say they are going to dry off the course tonight and tomorrow if it continues to rain. But I don't think it is going to be problem Sunday because it looks like it will be pretty dry. Hopefully.

ST: How important was your win at Challenge Barcelona?

Jimmy: It was very important because I had several podium finishes but no wins before. To find out you can win is a real nice feeling. To get to the finish line and know you are the best of the day is amazing.

ST: Tell us about your home here.

Jimmy: I live 20k north of Copenhagen at a place called Farum - near Rasmus Henning's home. We share some training there and we can ride or run every day if our schedules coincide.

ST: Will you stay training here?

Jimmy: Yes. We have great facilities nearby. Plus I am doing a project with a high altitude tent.

ST: Do you know your namesake, Jimmy Johnson, NASCAR racing champion?

Jimmy: I know who he is and I always say when he is not doing NASCAR, he can do triathlon.

ST: Who will be your toughest competition here?

Jimmy: First we will have to catch Bjorn Andersson. He will get off the bike well ahead of us. I think we will catch him on the run. But he is improving there. Keegan [Williams] also looks very fit, especially after his 3rd place at Roth. I know from Challenge Wanaka he can bike really well when things are tough.