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Christopher Shannon's big weekend

Escaping high school and Alcatraz



Scarsdale resident Christopher Shannon swims, bikes and runs during the Escape from Alcatraz Triathlon.

By **TODD SLISS**

While his friends were busy with high school graduation parties, Christopher Shannon was traveling across the country to give himself the best grad gift he ever could have asked for — competing in the prestigious, and grueling, Escape from Alcatraz Triathlon.

The Scarsdale resident and recent

Hackley School graduate has been a life-long swimmer and over the years took up biking and running as well (he competed in cross country at Hackley). His first experience putting all three together was the Jarden Westchester Youth Triathlon when he was 11 years old, but his next one, last summer, put him on the path to competing in top-level events.

In June 2011 he and his sister, Caroline, who just graduated from Vassar after a suc-

cessful swimming career there, won their age groups at the Sleepy Hollow Sprint Triathlon (.47-mile swim, 12.4-mile bike, 3.1-mile run are standard sprint distances) and he was second in his age group in the September 2011 Jarden Westchester Triathlon, which is an Olympic distance race (standard .93-mile swim, 24.8-mile bike, 6.2-mile run).

Though he was second to a 15-year-old at Westchester, he was the top 17-19-year-old finisher, which determines who can automatically qualify for Alcatraz, which offers its own interesting distances. Shannon grabbed the top spot and immediately researched the event.

"It was a complete surprise," Shannon said. "I looked it up, printed the forms and I knew it was one of those things I would make time for. Once I read about how hard it was I thought it would be a very good end-of-the-year present."

Shannon was one of 2,000 participants on June 10 in San Francisco, just one day after he graduated from Hackley. "The Rock" was a maximum security prison for 29 years, one from which no escapee ever made it to shore alive. Now for 32 years, athletes have challenged themselves with the 1.5-mile swim to shore, followed by an 18-mile bike ride and an 8-mile run through the Golden Gate Recreation Area, which may sound nice, but the hills make it a major obstacle.

Shannon battled the cold, choppy waters and the hills on bike and foot and finished in two hours, 38 minutes and 7 seconds. He was second of five in his age group, 70th of 1,324 males and 85th of 1,714 overall finishers. Andy Potts of Colorado Springs won in 2:03.17, beating out runner-up Courtney Atkinson of Quebec (2:03.53).

"It was much more like swimming in a storm," Shannon said. "There were relatively small waves, but it was very cold. I didn't notice it at first until I thought about it. You just jump off the boat and go. They get you off and you swim away or somebody will jump on you. I looked at some pictures afterwards and it was amazing to see the 2,000 people getting

Continued on next page

Escaping high school and Alcatraz

Continued from previous page

in within six minutes.

“The bike for Alcatraz was 7 miles shorter than what I did to qualify, but it was so much harder. The hills got steeper and steeper as the race went on, and then the run was killer since it was on the same steep hills. Plus I hadn’t run in sand in a while and every time you pushed down you were pushing sand and expending even more energy than normal and you don’t go as far.”

In addition to the challenges of the swim and the run, there was also a bike malfunction that luckily got cleared up enough for Shannon to compete on race day. Since the “bike didn’t come out how I had packed it,” according to Shannon, he was one of about two dozen who relied on race mechanics to help competitors with their equipment at 4:30 a.m. on race day.

Shannon knew he was “lucky to be able to race on that bike.” After all it was a brand new bike and he spent nearly two years’ salary earned as a lifeguard at the Scarsdale Pool to buy it. The Trek Madone 5.2 needed a new part when he got back home, but for the race it still allowed him to “accelerate like a hot knife through butter.”

Certainly the support of his family, especially his older sister, who first took up swimming and later pushed him in and out of the water with the Middies and Empire swim clubs, was a major player in Shannon’s success, but

so was the race coordinator, Eric Gilsenan, who made some allowances so that Shannon would be able to compete.

“He allowed me to not have to go to the information sessions and dropped my packet off the night before the race at my hotel,” Shannon said. “He made all the accommodations I needed and I didn’t think he had to do that. But that’s the community and he wanted me to be able to do this. That’s an experience that’s unforgettable, something that made this possible.”

This is 19-year-old Shannon’s first summer since age 7 that he is too old to swim for the Scarsdale summer team, but he’s still training with Empire. He made the switch from Middies to Empire when the coach left and practice times were slashed. It was ironic with all of the success he’s had lately in the Middies, Hackley and Scarsdale summer team record books, that when he and his sister first tried out for Middies she made it and he did not until the following year.

What always appealed to Shannon was the “community” of swim teams over the years, starting in Scarsdale, of course. He is now finding that in the world of triathlons.

With Empire, Shannon got to compete in some of the biggest meets in the country, including four times in Fort Lauderdale at the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

“We had some in North Carolina, but after a while you’d win the meet as a team and then it would be a test for us as individuals and Florida was the team test,” Shannon said. “It’s amazing to have an international community there and fun to see people who are so fast that it takes your breath away.”

“I wanted to prove to myself I was able to swim as fast as I wanted to. Sometimes I went with my family and one year I did it on my own and that also felt good because the team pushed me to be my best. At that time we had just become Empire so I was starting out with a lot of the team records in my age group.”

Like his sister, Shannon concentrated on breaststroke and individual medley events, and excelled.

Shannon’s success will push him even harder as a triathlete. He will also continue his swimming career at Franklin & Marshall starting in the fall. He plans to do triathlons in Beijing in 2013 and is also hoping that one in Rio fits in with his school schedule. Of course, for now, in addition to all of the training he has to do, he’s back lifeguarding at the pool.

“There’s so many out there and now I know I can qualify for ones that are harder and harder,” Shannon said. “As long as I keep making money lifeguarding I can pay for part of my plane tickets. For two years all the money I earned went for the new bike, so I’m slowly building my account back up.”