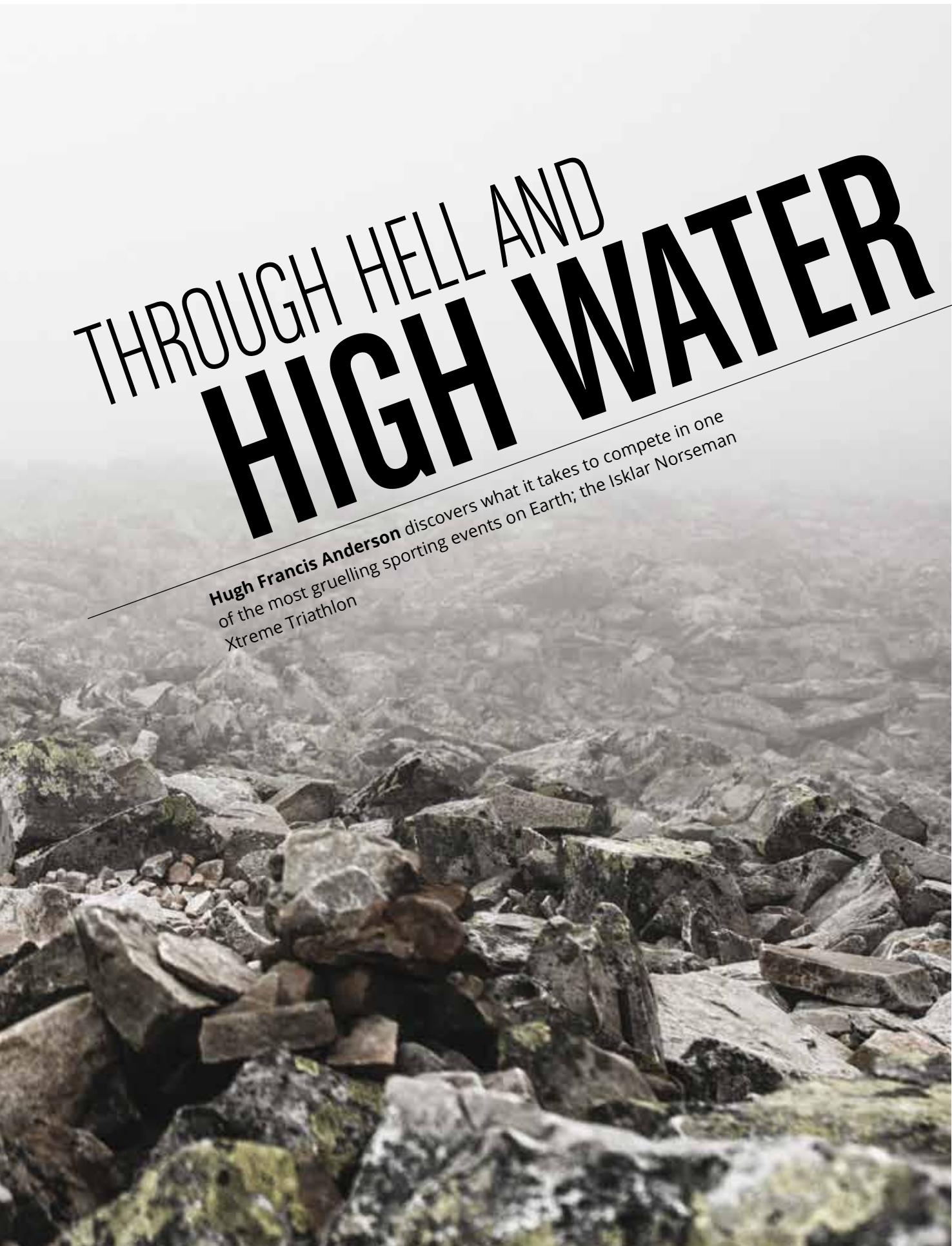




THROUGH HELL AND HIGH WATER

Hugh Francis Anderson discovers what it takes to compete in one of the most gruelling sporting events on Earth; the Isklar Norseman Xtreme Triathlon





Desire for people to push themselves to the very limit of both physical and mental boundaries is growing, and with rapid pace. There has been a marked increase in extreme sporting events which push the concept of healthy living to the limits.

The Isklar Norseman Xtreme Triathlon, held in the Norwegian wilderness, is one such event. Starting with a 2.4-mile swim through the freezing Hardangerfjord, the athletes then embark on a 112-mile bicycle race, taking them from sea level to 1,200m, and finish with a full marathon, ending at the summit of the Gaustatoppen Mountain, some 1,880m above sea-level. As the world's most extreme Ironman-length triathlon, it calls out to both professional and amateur athletes alike as the pinnacle of human possibility. There is no glory, there are no official accolades, there is only the black finisher's T-shirt and the honour of calling yourself a "Norseman".

Triathlons have always enticed adventurous souls to compete. As a tri-discipline event, and one that demands a wide array of skills, techniques and physical attributes, it is considered one of the hardest sports on earth. In London, triathlon is on the rise, with the recent London Triathlon attracting more than 13,000 amateur and professional athletes to compete.

For some, though, competing in a triathlon, or even an Ironman, is not enough. Now there is a new breed of athlete, wishing to truly discover what they are made of, and the Norseman is the playing field

upon which to find out.

Founded back in 2001 by amateur triathlete Paal Hårek Stranheim, the vision was to reinvent the sport. "His idea was that you have to create an event that's crazy enough to make the foreigners come along," says Norseman general manager, Dag Oliver. "And his theory has proven very correct, increasing in popularity year by year."

So what does it take to become a Norseman? "Anyone with a good basic physical fitness and will to complete will get through the race," says Oliver. "Of course, there are differences between those who go through the race enjoying it, and those who are in pain."

Like all balloted, open events, there is a wide spectrum of competitors, from the amateur on a 1980s road bike, to the professional on a new carbon fibre invention – they come in many forms, but with the one unifying quest to complete the race.

"For the 2015 event, we had 2,400 applicants, and out of that we pulled 250 athletes," says Oliver. Due to the danger of the race, it has to be limited to 250 athletes, and, as such, has become the holy grail of extreme triathlon events, with an international notoriety. As Oliver says, "wearing a Norseman Xtreme Triathlon T-shirt at any triathlon or Ironman competition in the world will make you the cool kid on the block."

And it's not only the physical and mental preparation that takes resolve – each athlete must provide a support crew, and incur all costs themselves.



ESSENTIAL KIT



Not only is there the huge financial outlay for necessary training and equipment, but, says Oliver, "on average, a Norseman athlete will invest somewhere in the vicinity of £5,000 into participating" – a steep price to pay for spending the best part of 12 hours pushing yourself to the absolute max.

Why? You may ask. It fundamentally falls down to human nature, to our psychological predisposition to test our own limits. "This is a matter of people wanting to find out if they're capable of solving such a task," says Oliver. "It's a man or a woman versus themselves, their nature." Yes, a strong physical foundation is key to any endurance event. The body has to be trained to a certain level before beginning, not only to learn the skills and techniques of the chosen discipline, but to develop the muscle memory and strength, a strong aerobic and anaerobic core – but it is strength of mind that ultimately get you to the finish line.

"The process of getting ready is the hard part, coming here is the party"

As one Norseman explains, "the process of getting ready is the hard part, coming here is the party, it's the combination of something you've worked so hard for, this is a good day."

A race like Norseman is to test how mentally tough you are, how, above all else, you are willing to bury yourself to know your own mental strength. Norseman is an event where you can never know beforehand how deep you'll have to dig in order to survive. "Are you ready for the distance and the elevation? Those two are constant," says Oliver, "but temperature in the water, snow on the mountains, the wind on the plateau, these are the X factors that can make your day good or miserable."

Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian of all time, once said, "you can't put a limit on anything. The more you dream, the farther you get." It's a mantra that screams truth where Norseman is concerned. Finishers should be celebrated for their resilience, determination and zest for life; for pushing yourself to the limit is one of the most commendable acts imaginable. ☺

The ballot for the 2016 Isklar Norseman Xtreme Triathlon opens in late October; for more information visit [nxtri.com](#)