
USA Triathlon sends athletes to Cuba for first time

19/01/2015



Adam Gordon has never won a triathlon, and the software engineer from Boulder, Colo., regularly finishes in the middle of the pack. But in nine days, Gordon will write his name into triathlon's history books as one of the first Americans to ever compete in Cuba.

"The race is just another triathlon in my mind," said Gordon, 39. "The experience is one of those once-in-a-lifetime things."

Gordon is one of 25 American triathletes who will compete in the Jan. 24-25 Habana Camtri Triathlon events in downtown Havana. The two-day competition is comprised of triathlons of three different distances: sprint (.47-mile swim, 12-mile bike, 3.1 mile run), Olympic (.93-mile swim, 25-mile bike, 6.2-mile run) and long course (1.2-mile swim, 56-mile bike, 13.1-mile run).

Organizers expect approximately 220 athletes to participate in the races. Gordon will compete in the sprint.

The Camtri event is Cuba's first-ever triathlon to welcome American athletes, according to the sport's international governing body, the International Triathlon Union.

A spokesman with the U.S. Olympic Committee said the race also marks the first American participation in any Cuban competition following last month's announcement that the U.S. and Cuba would reestablish diplomatic relations.

"This isn't about politics," said Barry Siff, board president for USA Triathlon, the sport's national governing body. "It's about showing our support for the Cubans who are trying to grow triathlon."

Siff learned about the event at an ITU meeting in June, and asked triathletes over Facebook if they wanted to participate. The positive response from amateur athletes prompted USA Triathlon to create a first-come, first-serve

registration process for its members.

The 25 spots filled up within a few minutes, Siff said.

The process for clearing the 25 athletes to race in Cuba took substantially longer — approximately three months, Siff said.

For nearly 50 years, the U.S. embargo to Cuba created an impenetrable wall for athletes hoping to compete there.

In 2007 the USOC's government relations office started overseeing Cuban travel for U.S. athletes. The office submits an application to the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, which oversees all U.S. citizen travel to Cuba. The process requires anywhere from 30-45 days to clear.

Since 2007 approximately 250 American athletes have competed in Cuban competitions by way of the USOC licensing process, a USOC spokesperson said.

The White House announced Thursday that Americans authorized to visit Cuba no longer need to apply for special licenses.

Triathlon officials hope that the new rules pave the way for additional American participation in future Cuban triathlons.

"Triathlon is popular in the USA and Mexico," said Enrique Quesada, senior manager of sports results for the ITU. "In the future we hope it will be very easy to get a big amount of people to travel to races in Cuba."

The ITU is organizing the Camtri event alongside the Spanish chapter of the Cultural Society of Jose Marti, an international Cuban cultural group. The two groups shipped various triathlon infrastructures — such as metal crowd barriers, timing equipment and even bicycles — to Cuba, along with medical and school supplies.

ITU President Marisol Casado said the ITU would leave the infrastructure in Cuba for future races. Part of the \$200 entry fees also benefit Cuban charities, she said.

"The main idea is to develop the sport for the citizens of Cuba," Casado said.

Cuba has a national triathlon team, and its elite athletes regularly compete in races throughout Latin America. Amateur participation, however, is basically nonexistent, Quesada said. While triathlons in the U.S. regularly draw thousands of participants, the few Cuban triathlons draw just a handful of racers.

"They would maybe have 40 people in a race" Quesada said. "It is not a sport for mass participation."

U.S. Olympic triathlete Manuel Huerta, who was born in Cuba but immigrated to Miami, said triathlon's expensive sticker price will continue to keep Cubans away. Triathletes can easily spend several thousand dollars on bicycles, wetsuits and running shoes.

"Entry fees are a few hundred dollars alone," Huerta said. "I hope this race creates more opportunities but I don't know how Cubans can pay that."

Huerta said participants should consider bringing used bicycles, shoes and gear with them to donate to Cuban athletes. The expensive products, Huerta said, contribute to the sport's growth.

Jessica Rossing, an amateur triathlete from Duluth, Minn., said she is collecting used bicycle parts and cycling clothing in preparation for her trip. Like Gordon, Rossing is less focused on her race than on the overall experience.

"I feel pretty ignorant when it comes to everything about Cuba," she said. "The race is an excuse to see it firsthand."