

Triathletes heating up

City group hopes 'secret weapon' provides an edge south of border

Thursday, March 17th, 2005

By Chris Cariou, Winnipeg Free Press

THEY may hail from wintery Winnipeg, but four of Canada's best young triathletes expect to sizzle when they compete in toasty Texas this weekend after training for the past several weeks in a heat chamber that should make them more ready to handle the heat than their southern hosts.

"It's a secret weapon, but it's not, because everybody should be doing it, it's so easy," sports scientist Greg Gannon said last week as Amy Briscoe, Blair Peters, Teresa Samek and Willie Bell sweated their way through their final training run in the cramped chamber at the University of Manitoba that approaches 40 C.

"But right now we're using it to our advantage, I think, because we're taking the time to do it."

The athletes have been training in the chamber for the past several weeks under Gannon's guidance so they can acclimatize to the warm temperatures they anticipate at the Texas State Triathlon in Austin.

Last year, before heading down to the U.S. Junior Triathlon Championships in Florida, Manitoba triathletes trained in a makeshift room filled with heaters and boarded up windows in the home of Gary Pallett, director and head coach of the Manitoba National Triathlon Centre.

In Florida, Erin Braun finished first and Briscoe second. Now they've gone high-tech while training mere centimetres from one another on stationary bikes inside a 10 x 10 box of heat, their core body temperatures recorded from tiny thermometers ingested in a \$70 pill they have swallowed and measured remotely from a device held by Gannon.

"The first time was really hard for all of us, we were all suffering" because of the intense heat in the chamber, Briscoe told the Free Press. "But it was interesting because you could see the progress that we were making and each day just got easier and easier."

As for swallowing a pill with a thermometer inside it?

"It was just so foreign to have something like that, so technologically-advanced, it was really neat," Briscoe said. "We kind of felt like we were guinea pigs a bit just because some of the things are so wacky and so out there but other than that, everything felt pretty good."

"It's neat to know that just because we have cold winters doesn't mean we won't be as prepared to race in hot weather."

Pallett said the makeshift heat chamber in his house worked OK, but it was hard keeping the temperature constant. Gannon, who works with the National Sports Centre Manitoba, is also a professor with Gordon Giesbrecht (a.k.a. Professor Popsicle) at the U of M and secured the use of the chamber from him.

Inside, it's like being in a sauna without the humidity. Except these athletes aren't just sitting there. They're cycling as hard as they can until Gannon tells them they've reached a core internal temperature of 39 C, at which point they just have to maintain their pace -- for a total of 60-75 minutes.

"It is quite neat," Pallett said. "The Canadian Sports Centre has been amazing. We've been able to institute a performance enhancement team so we've got people working, a sports psychologist, a physiologist... we're probably leading the country in terms of sports science delivery, in all sports, not just triathlon.

Sports science

"Not many sports have gotten into the sports science we're doing in Winnipeg."

Gannon said the idea of a heat chamber isn't so high-tech, but the pill thermometer is.

"When they're finished this process, two things will have occurred," he added. "One is that their core temperature now is lower overall; and two is that they start to sweat earlier... when your body reaches a core temperature of around 40 degrees, you start to get fatigue. Performance starts to fail.

"We don't want to get them to 40. The longer they can go without reaching 40 degrees, the better their performance. That's heat acclimatization."

The pill, about the size of a jelly bean, goes through the system in two days. It allows sports scientists for the first time to get an accurate recording of an athlete's core body temperature, which is crucial to training, especially this kind. They don't want to put too much stress on even incredibly fit athletes.

"We're going down to Texas and right now the average temperature down there during the month of March is about 75 degrees," Gannon said. "That's not a great heat load but Texans may not actually be heat-acclimated to higher temperatures because they live in this moderately warm climate at this time of year.

"We're coming from this -15 or -20 average. The neat thing about this is we can come from Winnipeg and actually be better suited to a hot day down there than them. So if they get an abnormally hot day -- there's probably a five to 10 per cent chance of an 88-90 degree day where we're going -- we'll actually be better tolerated to it than people from the south."

© 2005 Winnipeg Free Press. All Rights Reserved.