

Norseman : the black t-shirt's quest

Written by Cédric Viaud, 20/01/25



Mecca for most adventurous triathletes in the world, the Norseman is known as the toughest triathlon in the world.

If you don't know how brutal Norseman can be, here is the journey : you jump off a ferry at 5 AM. in a fjord, swim 3.8 km to the shore, where you take your bike for 180 km and 3400m D+, and finally run a marathon with 1700m D+ to the top of Gaustatoppen at 1850m altitude.

However, this does not prevent people from registering, quite the contrary actually, they were only 21 in 2003, they are now about 250 each year drawn at random from more than 5000 registrations.

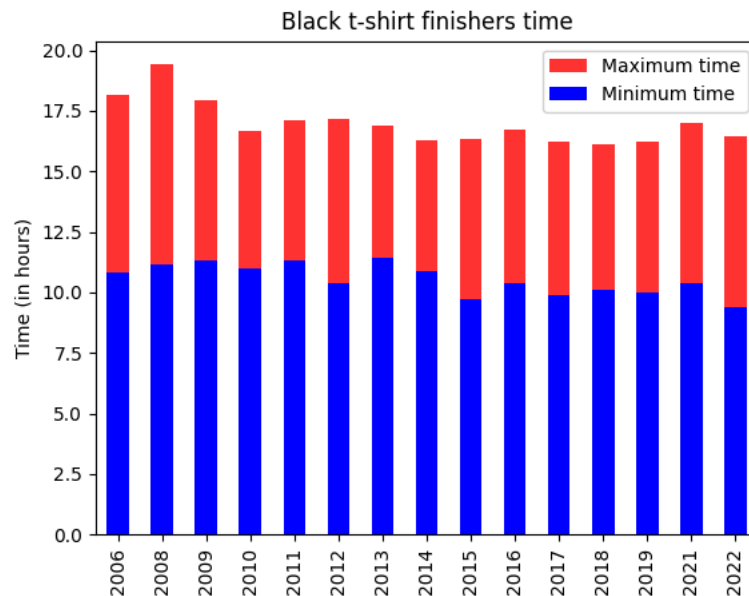
But not only to finish it, some pros come to win it, and most athletes have in mind going back home with the black t-shirt, awarded to the first 160 at the running km 37, allowed to continue to the top of Gaustatoppen. Otherwise you are awarded the white t-shirt finisher. More than a piece of fabric, it represents a true accomplishment for many triathletes.

But **what does it take to bring back home the black finisher t-shirt?** That is what we will see here.

Let's begin with the time it takes to finish the Norseman and get the black t-shirt :

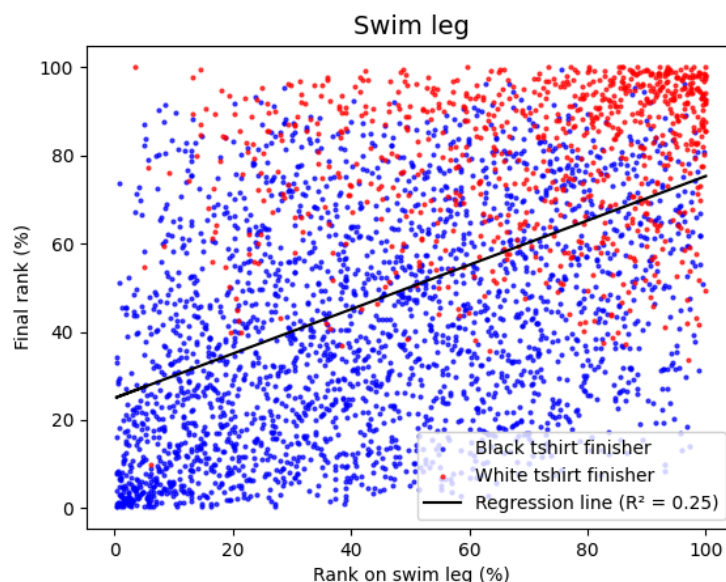
Compared to a "classic" Ironman, they are way higher. When most Ironman courses have a finishing barrier time of 17h, it's only the average of black t-shirt finishers on the Norseman.

It seems as well that even with the course record regularly smashed over years, the maximum time to get the black t-shirt is pretty much stable, with an average variation over the last 8 years of 0,2%. It is currently just below 17 hours.



Now we have the context let's dive into every discipline on the way to climb the Gaustatoppen :

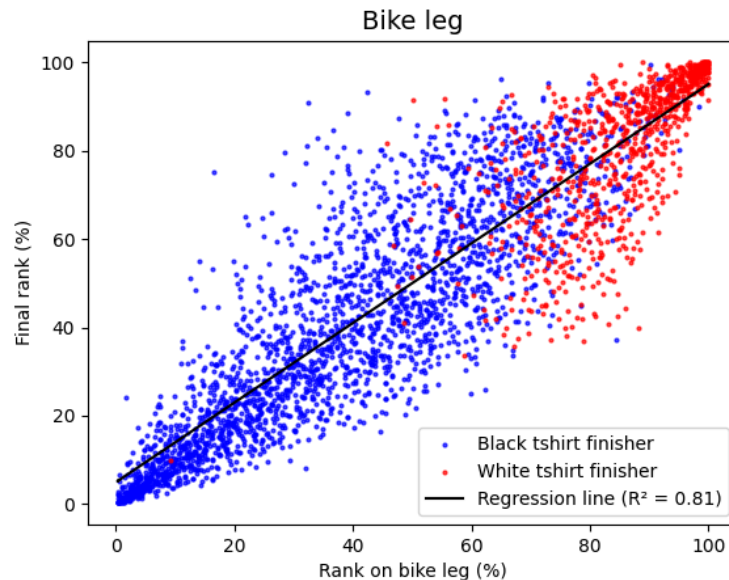
Beginning like every triathlon with the swim, the results here at the end of the **swim leg are not likely to predict the ending**. Even if the best athletes are great swimmers, the rest of the field is very disparate. First hint regarding the white t-shirt finishers, they are more likely to swim in the last positions as well. It could be either because of an overall fitness deficit of some amateurs or getting cold because of cold waters (12 to 16°C) and not being able to recover for the rest of the course.



The cycle leg is much more relevant :

The **correlation between the bike time and the final result is very strong.**

That means the bike leg is such an important part of the result that you can not miss it to make a performance, and the large majority of athletes missing the black t-shirt did the worse bike time.



However, when you look at the bike course elevation, these are easy words : no less than 3400m of elevation, 5 passes with gradients up to 20% ! A true mountain race and no doubt that being in a bad day will make it a long one.

One of the specificities of Norseman is that there are no aid stations, all you need has to be brought by your mandatory assistance over the course. Another parameter to take into account to perform.



Once you have reached the second transition, the worth may not be behind you : In fact, there is already in sight your objective, the Gaustatoppen, 42km of run away.

The first 25 kilometers of the run leg might make you feel worried as it is the first flat section you see from the beginning.

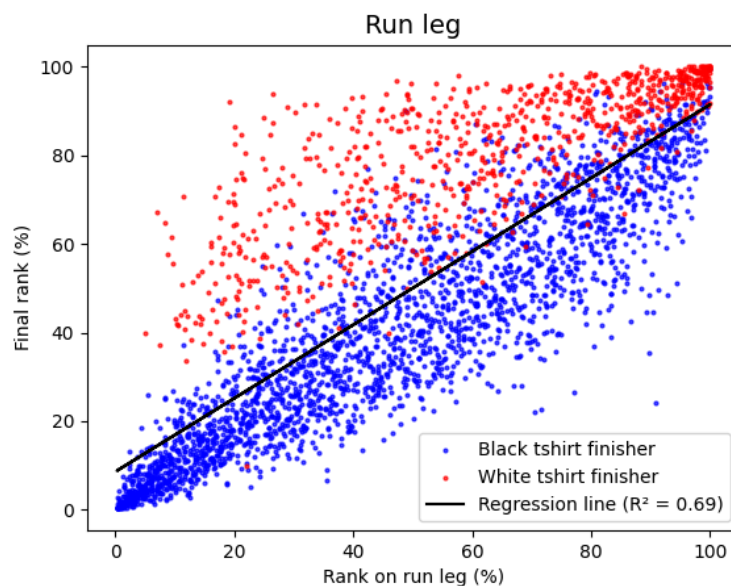
After that, you reunite with the Norseman spirit and begin to climb “Zombie Hill” , a lovely name isn’t it? It is a 12km climb with the 8 first having an average gradient of 9%.

It's at the end of that hill that you have to be in the first 160 competitors at the cut-off.

If you are fresh enough, you can still gain positions, but there will be less possibilities and it is still necessary that you are not too far from your competitors.

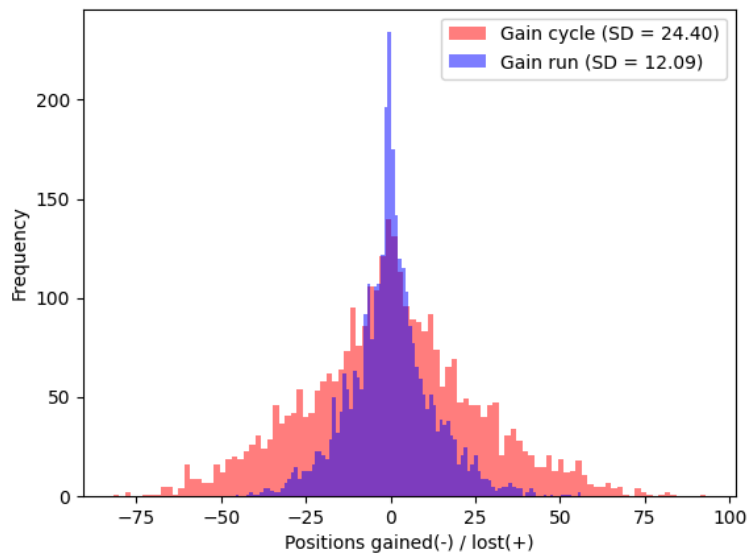
At this stage of the race, athletes are surely grouped by overall fitness level, that means the one in front and the one behind have probably the same capabilities. The difference will be made with the resilience you worked on and what you can still give on the run.

The **correlation between running leg ranking and the final position is still strong**, but we can also see that even if you are doing great at running, you can miss the black t-shirt because you were too far behind at the beginning of the run. We see as well that many white t-shirt finishers are grouped at the back of the running times.



Keep in mind that to reach the black t-shirt, we not only talk in terms of time but above all in terms of positions. And with such a punishing hill, not many athletes aside from the elites can run in Zombie Hill. Thus, **it becomes tough to gain some positions** with small speed differences.

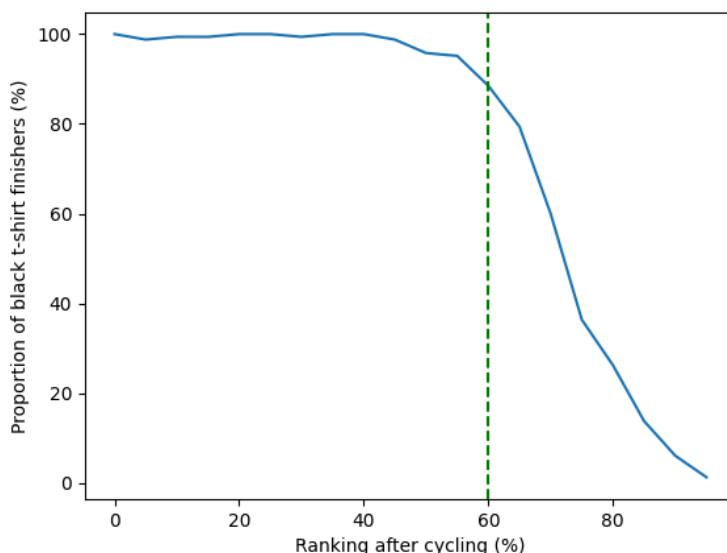
Whereas a large part runners keep their positions or gain a few, the standard derivation prove that the bike leg offers more chances to overtake than the running leg (as well as being overtaken).



If you are not disgusted yet, you may wonder what I have to do concretely to bring back home my black t-shirt ?

Well, here are your chances to get it regarding your rank at the end of the cycling : in the last years, **88% of athletes in the top 60% at the end of the bike leg, finished with a black t-shirt**. This pourcentage drops to 60% if you arrive in the top 70% after the bike.

Regarding the previous editions times, being in the top 60% means swim and T1 in 1h15, reaching T2 in 8h45 with an average bike time of 7h30 (corresponding to an average speed through 180km of 24 km/h), leaving you with 6h10 to finish the marathon (8'46/km).



If that looks doable for you that would be a fun journey to the black t-shirt!

Some advice would be to have an overall fitness level at your top on that day, be used to extreme weather conditions (cold water swimming, cold or windy bike in mountain, trail running in mountain) and have the resilience to keep up the pace until the end of the race.

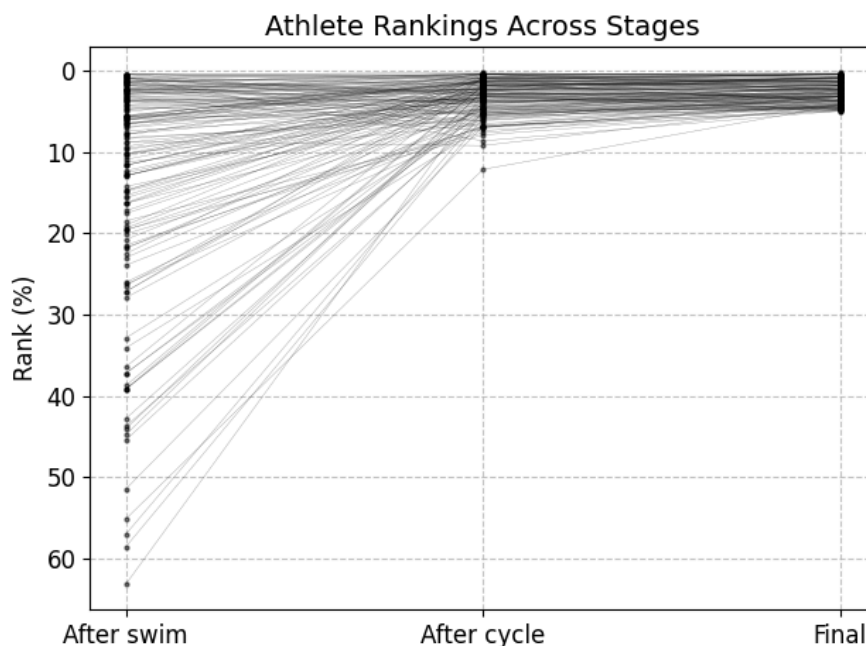
Like said before, the bike is the most important part, it's where you can make a gap for the rest of the course but running is always a relevant part if you can't keep up your position. To do so, you must not be on the edge while finishing the bike (obviously!) as you still have 1700m climbing to do. That is more like a managing part between your position and the cut-off taking into account your capabilities.

Finally, if you are used to this kind of effort, you may need to know what are the chances I will feature in the rankings. So here it is for you :

You have below the evolution of top 5% athletes in the different stages.

All we have said before is still applicable here, but exacerbated. The swim part is not the most relevant even if the best athletes are often in the best swimmers. And the most important metric here is that if you want to finish in the top, you absolutely have to be in the top cyclists. To give a more precise example, **only 4% of athletes that were out of the top15 positions after the bike finished in the top10 at the end.**

It goes without saying that you have to keep up the pace on the running part as well.



That is not a success guarantee but now you have a good idea if the well known Norseman black t-shirt finisher is still a dream or could fit well on your shoulders.