

G IRONMAN NIGHTLIFE DECATHLON

Rebooting an American competition of the 90s, which set out to determine the ultimate socialite

Words: JOSEPH BULLMORE

Rumours are like barnacles on a ship – if enough stick to you, you’re going to sink,’ says Anthony Haden-Guest. If that’s true, then the writer, socialite, cartoonist and professional cheek-kisser must be the most decorated and stately shipwreck in the entire ocean. Haden-Guest is a man who generates rumours, anecdotes, gossip and aphorisms like they’re going out of fashion – enough, in fact, to necessitate an entire section in New York’s then-premiere society rag. The Ironman Nightlife Decathlon, printed in Manhattan’s *SPY* magazine every July from 1988 until it folded 10 years later, was a socialite’s olympiad inspired by the antics of Haden-Guest and his rivals. Bret Easton Ellis, Beau Bridges, Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame; each stepped into the arena to play up, play up, and play the game. And the *SPY* reporters – scribbling in the shadows, in disguise behind the bar, or trailing 10 metres behind in a sponsored Ford Tempo – were all too happy to keep score.

But that was then. This is now. Would today’s nightlife athletes pass muster against their forbears? And how has the sport evolved some 29 years on? Over a crackling transatlantic phone line I ask the contest’s three-time and reigning champion to lay down the racing line.

THE PLAYERS

‘New York back then was full of people who were very talented at having a good time,’ Haden-Guest begins. The record books concur. ‘As for this year’s potential ironmen, there are scores, maybe hundreds of them,’ wrote *SPY*’s editors, almost apologetically, on the eve of the second annual competition. They were talented at other things, too. Early Ironman team sheets were inflected with a distinct literary flavour: ‘postadolescent authors Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis’ did battle against Carl Bernstein (‘whose book has received a great number of reviews’) and Haden-Guest, whose own memoir was described only as ‘fashionably late’.

Donald Trump even gets a mention or two in the ‘89 final, though admittedly only as the receptacle of a slurry of sarcasm: ‘The short-fingered vulgarian’ is seen indulging in ‘one of his famous series of side-splitting “who invited her?” gags’, for which he earns 10 points from the judges. Haden-Guest magnanimously has this to say about his lesser athlete: ‘He never struck me as any more awful than anyone else.’ Not a bad campaign slogan for 2020.

Dumpy digits or not, the athletes back then were at least men of renown in other fields. Could we say the same today? *SPY* pulled the plug on the tournament just before the advent of the modern “It boy”, and well before the age of the reality TV star. But in 2017, these prototypes, you’ll have noticed, make up a large proportion of the roster. The rest is comprised of square-jawed graduates of varying model agencies; a handful of bored-looking

20-somethings with designer high tops, dubiously rich parents and mid-Atlantic accents; someone who deals in art, Hermès ties and other people’s money; and several self-proclaimed “entrepreneurs”, armed to the chemically-whitened back teeth with elevator pitches and clichés.

‘No-one reads magazines anymore,’ Haden-Guest tells me, with an almost

“New York was full of people who were very talented at having a good time”

admirable disregard for his audience. ‘The art world has replaced the literary profession as the supplier du jour. It’s always been full of self-promoters.’ And as for politicians, property moguls, or movie stars? These bygone team-sheet staples can no longer risk an appearance for fear of a career-ending injury. And that, Haden-Guest tells me, is all down to one thing...

THE COURSE

‘The camera phone basically killed off the VIP room as an arena where anything interesting might happen,’ says the former champion. Nowadays, all the most interesting people generally shy away from public displays of debauchery in fear of taking an iPhone flash to the nose at close range. ‘Anyone

with an IQ higher than two has worked that one out,’ says Haden-Guest.

Tim Jefferies, owner of Hamiltons gallery, agrees wholeheartedly: ‘The iPhone ruined everything,’ he says, before apologising to best pal Jony Ive, just in case the Apple designer happened to be wandering by. What a joy it must have been to socialise without the nagging thought that, like a tree falling in the forest, if the fun isn’t recorded, it didn’t really happen. (In the early 90s, by the way, Tim was known, slightly unfairly, as “the pashmina” of the social scene – smooth, bland, and draped over the shoulder of hundreds of beau-

tiful girls. Had *SPY* held an away fixture in Mayfair, the gallerist would have won hands down and bottoms up.)

The cities in question have changed, too. Haden-Guest describes how the 70s and 80s in both New York and London were infused with a genuine cultural curiosity. ‘The barriers were coming down, and people were interested in having a good time.’ Now, however, things have turned distinctly tribal. ‘People are retreating into their sets. I don’t get back to London much nowadays, but to me the communities of Chelsea and Knightsbridge have changed forever.’ Too much foreign >

BELOW:
Three-time champion Anthony Haden-Guest and archived covers of *SPY* magazine



Photography: Getty



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31.05.17

RAISING A GLASS TO GERRY'S GENIUS

Land Rover and Gentleman's Journal joined forces to celebrate the beauty of design at Annabel's. The evening was hosted by Chief Design Officer, Gerry McGovern, who gave a talk about the inspirations behind the latest vehicle to come from the marque, the Velar.



investment, too many vacant windows and iceberg houses – the ailments that beset London-at-large infect its night-life also.

More dismaying is the realisation that no-one has as much money anymore. Manhattan back then was the Manhattan of Trading Places and Patrick Bateman. (It would surprise no-one, in fact, if Bret Easton Ellis had copied a great deal of the dialogue for *American Psycho* from the transcript of a Decathlon night out). American Express sans limit, nepotism on speed dial, stock markets on steroids. Not so now. Sure, the one per cent are creamier than ever – but the bohemians and professionals have largely been priced out of the bargain.

‘And most rich people these days are boring,’ says a rich friend of mine with a baffling absence of irony that instantly proves his point.

LET THE GAMES BEGIN

To the sport. How might the Decathlon play out if it were held today? Events in *SPY*’s prototype olympiad spanned from the workmanlike “Hours Logged” and “Venues Visited” to the more dexterous “Public Feeding” and the heart-in-mouth showdown of “Women Chatted Up”. Some of these can stay. (Certainly, “Studied Indifference” is a useful discipline for any gentleman under the flashbulb of a club photographer.) But “Manhandling Division”, an event that judged the handsier, fleshier exploits of Manhattan’s leading men, would now raise skirts, eyebrows and lawsuits in the order named.

On the whole, our sport must adapt to our climate – we could not reasonably ask Roger Federer to play with a wooden racket. Without further ado, then, allow us to present some events for this year’s reimagined Ironman Nightlife Decathlon... ⑥

NETWORKING

- **+15 points...** for handing out business cards with a vaguely unintelligible job title (Chief Ideapreneur/VP of Fun/Info-vore and Funding Nomad)
- **+10...** for saying ‘I’ve just given away my last card, actually’ while patting your pockets, even though you never had any business cards
- **+5...** for using any of the following phrases: ‘truly disruptive’; ‘perhaps we should do breakfast’; ‘great to connect’
- **-50...** if you’re launching a dating app

DINING

- **+15...** for saying ‘that’s great’ when the waitress tells you that all the food will come out at different times, even though that really isn’t great because you don’t want soup after your sorbet
- **+15...** for asking ‘how pale is the rosé?’ when ordering the wine
- **+10...** for choosing a restaurant with the cubic footage of an en suite bathroom and tables far too tiny to accommodate the 18 small plates you’ll need to feel full
- **+10...** for ordering espresso martinis after pudding like you’re the first person to ever think of doing so
- **+5...** if your date says ‘does this have dairy in it?’ at any point

DANCING

- **+15...** for spinning a girl round violently like it’s the 1950s even though it really hurts your wrist and she feels sick
- **+10...** for dancing uncomfortably on a table, feeling vaguely uneasy about its structural integrity and suddenly self-conscious that you don’t know half as many of the words to this tropical house remix as you thought you did
- **-10...** for sitting at the bar, stony-faced, saying ‘you prefer to leave it to others to embarrass themselves’

MEMBERS ONLY

- **+1...** for every private club you’re a member of
- **Double points...** if you tell people you got the membership for free because you ‘know the owners’ when you definitely didn’t
- **Triple points...** if the club is essentially just one room and there’s no discernible advantage to being a member at all because almost anyone can get in at any time anyway

PAYING THE BILL

- **+25...** for chucking your credit card nonchalantly on the table and saying ‘I’ve got this’
- **+20...** for not complaining when five girls you’ve never met order three rounds of daiquiris and a bottle of prosecco with a Catherine wheel attached to it, but then leave to go to a better party as soon as it’s time to pay
- **-15...** for poring over the bill receipt with the torch on your iPhone, meticulously working out who had what and whether they charged you for tap water

SCORECARD

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18.05.17

GJ TO Bermuda

Gentleman's Journal and the Bermuda Tourism Authority welcomed guests to the launch of the 20th issue of the magazine, with a cocktail event held on the rooftop at the Ham Yard Hotel in the heart of Soho. Men's lifestyle and fashion influencer, Jack Guinness, who recently visited the island, hosted the party.



Host for the evening,
Jack Guinness

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HOSTED BY JACK GUINNESS

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You are cordially invited to our summer party in association with Bermuda Tourism Authority at the

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THURSDAY 18TH MAY

19:00 TILL 22:00

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SOCIETY

159



Charlie van Straubenzee
and Daisy Jenks



Andre Brenner
and Andy Facer

UPLOAD TO WIN A HOLIDAY TO BERMUDA

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