

It Takes An Anvillage

2016 Florida Double Anvil Race Report

Maria Simone ~ March 23, 2016

"3...2...1...Go!"

"Is that the start?" I overheard one of my fellow racers ask.

Yup.



I put my face in the blackest water I've ever swum and began my second go-round at the [Florida Double Anvil](#), which is a double iron-distance event featuring 281.2 miles broken into a 4.8 mile swim, a 224 mile bike, and a 52.4 mile run. Each of these distances are completed in a series of laps: 12 laps for the swim, 37 laps for the bike, and 26 laps for the run.

After all of this lapping, there are multiple repeats of food and sleep.

This race report includes a recap of my experience on race day – but first, I have to set the context for this truly unique event. So, settle down, grab your coffee (or your adult beverage of choice), and a snack. This one has plenty of details.

The Anvillage

It would be a mistake to think of a Double Anvil as simply twice an Ironman. While the numbers do add up that way, the experience is so much more than just those numbers.

Representative of these differences is the very language used to describe the center of the race. An Ironman has a transition area. The Double Anvil has a village. That's more than just a semantic difference.

Within the confines of that Anvil village—what I'm going to call the Anvillage—lies the key to what makes this event so special: a sense of community that comes from pushing the edges of our comfort zones, sharing the belief that limits are for other people, and finding our strength not only as individuals—but also as a community of people [seeking the extraordinary](#).

While I raced as a solo racer, this effort was hardly an individual effort for me – or for any of my fellow racers. It is not possible to cross the finish line of a race of this magnitude without the support of the Anvillage. The respect and support of the racers, their crews, and the race staff is like no other race I've ever done.

Not. Even. Close.



Our crew, right before the start of the race.

The commiseration or commendation of your fellow comrades-in-laps can lift you out of a hole or help you ride the high to the finish line. There were times when I was convinced that to go another lap would be a seemingly impossible, Herculean effort. But, then, a fellow racer or their crew would cheer me on, give me words of encouragement, and I was fueled and renewed by the knowledge that if I believed it – I would achieve it.

We may have started as individuals, but in passing through the Anvillage lap after lap after lap—and yeah, another lap—we crossed the line into family.

The Uncomfortable Zone

Triathlon continues to [push me outside of my comfort zone](#). Toeing the starting line still gives me an addictive mix of pleasurable uncomfortable sensations: creeping fear, rushing excitement, and eager curiosity.

These are the feelings of being *alive*. There are so few opportunities to live truly in the moment, to be focused on the sound of my breath, to feel the tug of my muscles, to reflect on my thoughts and experiences. Endurance sport rewards me with many of these moments.

For all of these sensations and moments, I love long course racing. While my perception of “long” has changed, my appreciation for the experiences that the long course brings has deepened. And, that’s a good thing since the 2016 Florida Double Anvil was the longest of the “long” for me so far. I was in constant motion for 26 hours and 48 minutes.

Yes, I was *alive*—even if at times, uncomfortably so.

Aggressive Goals

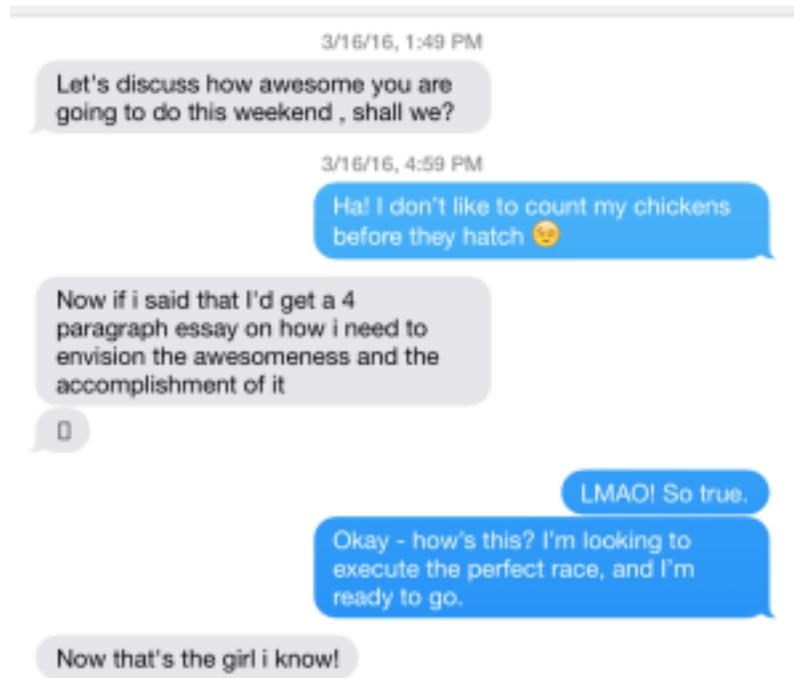
I went into this race with aggressive outcome goals for time and placement. My goals were so aggressive that I’m embarrassed to admit them (and wouldn’t speak of them at all prior to the race), for fear that I sound cocky or arrogant. I like to dream big, but I don’t want to seem like an a-hole.

But, here goes: I wanted to place in the top 3 overall (men and women), and I wanted to break the world record, which stands at 23 hours and 45 minutes. At a minimum, I wanted a go at the American record, which stands at 25 hours – a time I fell short of by 41 minutes [last year](#). The time records still stand...for another day, perhaps.

One of the main challenges in reaching my time goal was the fact that the course for the Florida Double has changed. Let's just say that last year's course was faster due to changes in terrain that increased the challenge for all 3 legs of the race. When I did [recon of the new course back in January](#), I realized my hopes for a record were slim at best, but I was still holding on to my goal to hit the overall podium. After all: the course would be hard *for all of us*.

While I want to achieve my goals, I've learned that when race day comes I CANNOT focus on them. I have trashed races worrying about my time or placement—as I've written about before (see [here](#), or [here](#) as an example). I knew the only way I would survive the day was to focus on the process and to live moment by moment.

In the days leading into this race, one of my friends and I had the following text exchange:



Perfect sounds bold—total a-hole. I know. But, let me explain.

For me, the perfect race doesn't mean that everything goes 100% according to plan. In all of the years I've been racing, I've *never* had a race that didn't present some sort of unknown challenge – [or series of challenges](#). Those challenges are precisely what I *like* about racing. I love the strategy, the problem-solving, the need to act and react to the day as it unfolds. It's a workout for the body and mind.

For me, "perfect" means that I executed the race to my potential, and I adapted to whatever challenges presented themselves. The worst thing I could think after a race is: "I should have..." *Ugh*.

Key to this execution is my PEDS strategy, which served me well during the [Javelina Jundred](#). PEDS = Pace, Eat, Drink, Smile. This is precisely how I got through the next 26 hours and 48 minutes.

So, onward to the swim, shall we?

The Swim



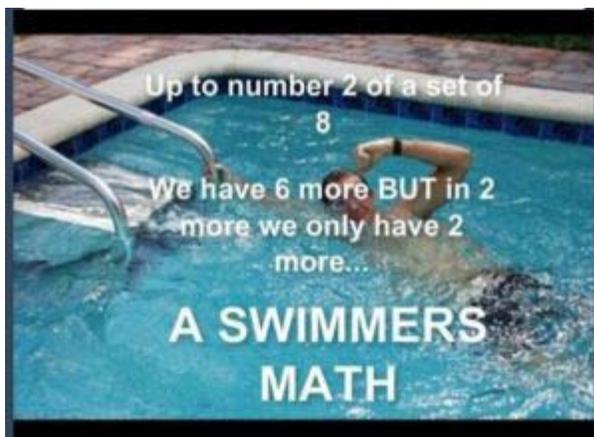
The 4.8 mile swim, held in Lake Louisa, was broken into 12 laps, of 704 yards each, through black water – made so by the tannins from the trees.

How black, you may ask?

So black that I could not see my hand when it was stretched in front of me. The dark water was probably for the best since we were sharing Lake Louisa with alligators, who make their home there. Best not to get an eyeful of that. We found out after the race that we had a reptilian friend hanging out at the third buoy.

How's that for an uncomfortable zone?

For me, the first half of this swim was the hardest. I wasn't able to settle into a rhythm. But, by the time I got through the 6th lap, I had gotten into a sighting rhythm and began to settle into the day.



I suppose that's one benefit of a long race – plenty of time to find your rhythm.

As I came around to finish the sixth lap, I said to my crew manager Tim, "Finishing the sixth lap, right?"

"Yup!"

"Well," I replied, "By swimmer's math, I'm pretty much done!"

He laughed, and agreed, "Exactly!"

The swim done, I trotted from the lake to the Anvillage. I didn't waste any time transitioning to the bike and clocked the fastest T1 time of the day.

The Bike

The bike included one short lap of about 2 miles, and then 37 six-mile laps, which consisted of an out-and-back section within the confines of Lake Louisa State Park. From the Anvillage, we traveled 1.5 miles and made a 90-degree right turn. Ride 1.5 more miles and make a complete u-turn and head back to Anvillage the way we came.



A portion of the bike course. Twisty :)

Along the loop there were a few rollers in elevation, which equated to 2600 feet of climbing across the 224 miles (by my elevation-corrected Garmin file from the Edge 500). Certainly not the hilliest course ever. But after 224 miles, a 2% grade has a way of feeling just a bit like a 12% grade. Even so, I felt in control of the elevation—and my effort—the entire ride.

What made the bike challenging for me was the heat. It was by no means the hottest race I've ever done ([IMLOU in 2014 at 105 sweaty degrees](#) is still the record!), but 88 humid degrees was an

abrupt shift from the New Jersey winter – no matter how mild it's been.

Mentally, I had to play a series of games to avoid making stupid decisions to burn too many matches. In a race that takes longer than a day, you probably want to save those matches for the second day. Seemed to be a reasonable strategy to me, at least.

While I wanted the overall podium, I had to be honest about where I was and whether I could keep up with the boys.

I couldn't.

HOLY HOT DAMN!! Those boys were HAMMERING the bike WAAAAAYYYYYY above my pay grade!



First one lapped me, then another, then another – and then they all lapped me again. Oh, and let's lap her one more time just to make certain she understands we're faster.

Come here, poor little ego. It's okay. There, there, my little ego.

Working on the smile part of the PEDS strategy. My shoulders hurt so bad that lifting my arm even this much hurt terribly.

I had no choice but to let them go. I had to focus on my body and my race, and resist the temptation to chase.

But, I've got to be real here: swallowing my ego while the boys zinged by me – REPEATEDLY – was probably the hardest thing I did all day. I had come to compete. While that desire made me want to roar like a lion, I could muster little more than a kitten's meow.

One thing that helped in this regard was an uneasy stomach that would send up the rumbling and tumbling warning message whenever I pushed the effort. At the time, I was *so frustrated* by feeling sick because I was riding *below* where I had trained for the race. Yet, in hindsight, that queasy stomach probably saved my day.

It's hard to trust your strategy—and the process—when you are getting *crushed*. Yet, I had to believe that the race would come back to me, and if it didn't, I would have to accept that, too.

As the night descended on us, the bike became less about the race and more about just getting those damn 224 miles FINISHED.

Goodness golly me! Those nighttime miles can drag on and on and on.

It became clear pretty quickly that I needed something to keep me engaged for the night time.

So, *naturally*, it was time to sing. I pulled out my old favorites: "Don't Stop Believing," and "I Feel Good". But, I also crooned an eclectic mix of new motivators: "Timber," "Fight Song," "Summer Wind," "Take the Skinheads Bowling," "Add it Up" – to name a few. I was pulling from *all of the playlists*. Pandora doesn't have anything on me.

For most of these "classics", I adjusted the lyrics to fit my current situation, [as I frequently do](#). For example, with the Violent Femmes "Add It Up," I sang:

"Lap after Lap, I will ride, and I will play. But, the lap after 37, I will stop, and I will ruuuuunnnnn. Why can't I get off this bike? Why can't I get off this bike?"

Eventually, it *was* lap 37, and I was able to get off that contraption. #BikesArePoopy. Sweet relief!

The Run

My favorite part of triathlon is the moment [I get to put on my sneakers and run](#). Once I rack my bike, I know that there is nothing – short of passing out or dropping dead – that will keep me from crossing the finish line.

As I started the run, I was in fourth place overall, and I was the first place female. It was *hardly* time to rest.

I knew the guys who were in front of me, and I knew that not a single one of them was going to give up easily. I also knew that the second place woman (with whom I shared good conversation and words of support) was not far behind me, with maybe 1 or 2 laps left on the bike. As I began the run, I hoped that my approach to the bike would be enough to put me in striking range of the podium.



A portion of the run trail. This section had only mildly soft sand.

The run course included one short lap of approximately 1.5 miles, and then 26 lollipop loops that were just shy of 2 miles. Half of the loop was on the road, and the other half was on a sandy trail. My Garmin puts the total gain at only 428 feet, so the elevation changes were negligible – more like false flats. However, the sandy trail definitely slowed us down, and presented a muscular challenge that was much different from the road—or even the standard dirt trail.

Further complicating the run was the fact that the Park had done a controlled burn just a few days prior to the race, and unfortunately, the woods were still smoking – and in some cases, re-igniting little campfire-sized fires. Add in just the slightest touch of wind, and it made for “Smoky Hollows,” as one of the volunteers called it.

I’m still amazed that I didn’t have a full-blown asthma attack. Even over a week later, my lungs feel thrashed from inhaling the smoke for almost 10 hours.

While my pace was significantly slower on the trails, my effort felt higher given the way we had to dig through the o, I thrive on adverse conditions. As it burns (literally in this case), I can find a calmness of rhythm that allows me to continue to move no matter what.

I don’t stop moving. That’s my secret sauce. Pretty simple, right?



After the race, John described me as the “little diesel.” I felt especially flattered because this is *exactly* how I felt during the race: I was an object in motion that would stay in motion – even if that motion wasn’t particularly fast.

As per USAT rules, there were no headphones – but the sounds of the trail were plentiful. Throughout the night, I heard a symphony of crickets, various rustles in the woods (*yikes! What was THAT?*), and what I had thought were the barks and croaks of frogs. As it turns out, those barks were alligators crooning through the night. (Maybe we should rename this one as the Alligator Anvil?)

As daylight came through the trails, I could hear the sounds of the morning songbirds, and felt the woods coming to life. With the morning sunlight, I was able to see my surroundings on the run more clearly. That trail was eerie and beautiful at the same time – especially with the charred remains from the controlled burn.

Coming in to the finish line, as they play the national anthem and you run a few yards with the flag unfurled. If that doesn’t get you, I don’t know what will! So, yes, I cried. Again.

