

Double ANVIL Success with Strong Team Effort

4.8mi swim. 224mi bike. 52.4mi run. 36hr cutoff.

Michael Ortiz ~ 21 March 2016

It was the most challenging thing I have done, but I didn't get through this one alone. No, not at all. This experience has given me a valuable lesson in the importance of having a crew for this kind of race. And while I'd gotten to Florida on my own, I wound up leaving with an ultra triathlon family. Here's how it went down.

Last Thursday, I had to push out my flight later, meaning I would miss check-in at the race site. Race director, Steve, however told me I didn't have to worry and that we'd take care of it on race morning. Four weeks ago, I'd posted that I was considering dropping the race due to recent changes at work that would require my full focus, and that it was Steve's phone call to me back then that kept me in. He had solutions for all of my concerns around logistics, and come race weekend, he stood true to his word and addressed every one of them.

During the 40-minute ride from the airport to the bike shop, I continued typing away at a report for work on my phone, all the while a little worried about how I was getting my bike from the bike shop to the athlete dinner. But when I arrived, the owner of Clermont Bicycles told me not to worry. Not only did he reassemble my bike, but he re-taped my aero bars and offered to drive me and my bike wherever I needed to go, without asking for anything in return.

At the athlete dinner, I met [Erik Hanley](#), who gave me many pointers on how to handle my first Double. He'd also be the one responsible for directing crew members my way once he found out I was unsupported, though I didn't know it at the time. After the dinner, [Johan 'Taz' Desmet](#) and his wife graciously offered their spare bedroom in their cabin in the state park, which was a true blessing because I hadn't gotten a lot of sleep the days leading up to the race and that arrangement meant I could get adequate rest before the start. [Jade Kent-Medders](#) offered to drive my bike and me to the state park to Johan's cabin, but took me to Wal-Mart first so I could get my nutrition for the race. With lodging, bike transport, and nutrition taken care of, I felt a huge weight lifted off my shoulders, finished my report and it was lights out by midnight.

At 6am my alarm went off and I was surprisingly fresh. Johan, his wife and I went to the race area to set up our stations. Nervous and excited, I began setting up my table, not really knowing what I should be doing (because I'm accustomed to working out of a suitcase), and fumbling around in the dark with my bike, trying to mimic others and do the things a real triathlete should be doing.

My area felt pretty lonely. I started getting worried about not having support when I saw the size of the crews the more experienced triathletes had brought, but the feeling was

short-lived. Johan's wife, [Laura Knoblach](#) and her parents, [Maria Simone](#) and [John Jenkins](#)' crew (especially [Janine Aeberli-Begasse](#) and [Karl Trout](#)), [Steven Hendricks](#) and his wife, [Joey Lichter](#)'s crew, support from [Vasilis Toxavidis](#), [Katie Riston](#), [Dave Harris](#) and team Goofballs - all had offered to help with just about everything under the sun - nutrition, water bottle refills, motivation, support. I can't really explain how comfortable and warm all of these kind gestures made me feel. It was quite an offering, one of which I am so grateful for. I tried to compensate by keeping a big smile through it all and maintaining a positive spirit, no matter how hurt or fatigued I was feeling on the inside.

I started the swim feeling more comfortable about the day after everyone offered to help. It was nice to have in the back of the mind because the swim (and the 3.5 hours it would take me to complete nearly 8,500 yards in the water) was very long. When it was over, I came back to transition, took off my wetsuit, and logged in to check work emails and make sure the weekly publication on the sections I'd written for it were on pace to be published as planned. 25 minutes in transition flew by before I realized it.

Then, [Lisa Reynolds Vega](#) and [Red Zion](#) (Michelle) came up to me, introduced themselves because they heard I didn't have a crew. They were volunteering for the race but said they'd look after me. But more than that they asked me what I was doing on my phone. And then Vasilis came to me, looked me in the eyes and said, "Hey, you gotta get on your bike now or else you're not going to finish this thing." I thought it was absurd since I had 32 hours left in the race, but I could see that he was serious. So I put the phone away, trusted that my team had the weekly publication taken care of, and put my bike shoes on. While I did that, Michelle, Lisa, and Vasilis adjusted my bike seat, loaded my pockets with nutrition and water bottles with electrolyte drink and gave me that gentle push I needed to get going.

They would continue to push me for the entire 224 miles of the bike. Because my body had never felt that distance on the bike before I took the first 112 miles at an easy pace. But as time flew on by and the hilly laps became harder, I realized that the 32 hours I originally considered as "all the time in the world," wasn't. I needed to get the ball rolling, and fast.

Lisa and Michelle kept me on the move, telling me not to get off the bike after each lap to refill nutrition because they'd have it ready for me so I could keep it moving. I felt like a formula one racecar driver. And when those overnight hours got really tough (and boy, were they tough), they pushed me on, asking me to go a little harder with each lap and giving me advice on how to take the hills and when to taper. And when to switch into lower gears and use less power in order to help remove the lactic acid buildup in my muscles so I could start the run with fresh legs.

Somewhere during my final bike laps, they had to leave to do timing at the tent at the far end of the bike lap and left me in the hands of [David Seres](#), who helped bring in the race for me. David supplied me lights for bike for the night ride after realizing my headlamp was insufficient for the task and he coached me the rest of the way through.

The bike split was tough for me. One training ride at Chelsea Piers was all the practice I had time for in the last month, making Friday the longest 19 hours I'd ever spent on the saddle. Ouch. I wound up finishing the bike at 7:30am on Saturday, right as the sun was coming up. David told me I had 12.5 hours to run 52.4 miles and that I had to be a phenomenal runner to finish in that time after spending 224 miles on the bike. That worried me a lot because I really pushed it in the last 10 laps on the bike just so I could have at least 12 hours on the run.

But I didn't have the luxury of entertaining failure at that point because absolutely everyone was behind me with support and cheering. They made it a point to see me cross that finish line because they wanted to see me succeed. They were invested in my success as much as I was at that point. So I set my mind on it and didn't let the fear of missing the cutoff overwhelm me.

I took off running 8-9 minutes miles through the first half marathon. It was aggressive, but I had no choice. I needed to build a cushion for the lows that would inevitably come - those make-or-break miles I refer to in the 100-milers. After the first half marathon fatigue hit me and I started getting drowsy on my feet while I was in the woods because the soft sand surface felt so pillowy after a certain point. The next mile would take me 25 minutes as I stopped every 30 seconds to rest my elbows on my knees and shut my eyes.

I'd been in this position before and I knew the energy lows were merely temporarily, and that I needed to just get through it to see renewed energy. I swung around that low point and returned to fast miles after coming out of the woods and hitting pavement.

I started losing steam around the first marathon mark and that's when David came in and crewed me full time, meeting me at the end of the trail mark for every lap making sure I had whatever I needed and that I didn't slow down. He made sure I maintained my nutrition and hydration even if I didn't feel like eating anything. "Ok, what do you need?" "What hurts?" "Keep going; you're doing great." All of it was very motivating and was exactly what I needed to make sure I didn't waste time stopping to get water or food. And strangely at that point, all I kept asking for was ice cold water, half to drink and half to pour on my head.

So I kept it moving. Everyone in the village area cheered my name and applauded through every lap, saying things like, "Way to go, Michael!" "You're doing great!" "You're going to finish this!" It was a really amazing experience, and I cannot discount the mental boost that provided me in the last few hours of the race.

In the final 10 miles, while I was on the road, a car drove up cheering my name and honking. When I had gotten closer I realized who it was and I was speechless. [Katherine](#) and [Jeremy Zehr](#) and their daughters had driven down from Tampa to see me finish. They'd been watching my progress for the last day and a half. Their daughter Clara was who I ran for, in the Ironman Florida race. It was such a special surprise and I was deeply touched. That gesture alone gave me the drive I needed for the last few miles. Jeremy even ran a few laps with me, including the last lap which had to be run

backwards, and when I'd gotten to the finish, Clara handed the American flag to me so I could run it through the finish while the national anthem played. It was such a special experience.

I finished around 7:45pm and I quietly had intentions to take the last flight out at 9:30pm so I could be at the starting line for the NYC half marathon today at 6:30am. But I didn't finish in time to make the flight. And that turned out to be a blessing in disguise because attending the award ceremony today and hearing the speeches from all of the athletes was very humbling. Listening to everyone's reasons for racing, whether it was for charity, for fun, or for pushing their limits and challenging themselves, gave me such great perspective into this sport.

In the end, I realized that yes, our minds are the strongest tools we have for getting through something like the Double ANVIL. But having a strong support system is key. Thank you to the race director, to all the volunteers, to all the support from other crews, to those who cheered me on from afar and who drove to see me finish, those who gave me lodging when I needed it and those who gave my bike and me rides to and from the race site, and especially those who personally took me under wings to make sure I crossed the line. Thank you to all the athletes for making this an incredible experience and congratulations on all of your finishes! This weekend is one I won't ever forget. I share these IUTA and Double ANVIL medals with all of you. Thank you!

'Til next race.

