

Jeff Wamser ~ The Ultra Race Recap: Double Anvil Florida 2018

Thursday, March 15, 2018 ~ Clermont, Florida

It seems only fitting that an ultra-distance race requires an ultra-recap. If you've read my race recaps before, you know my goal is to take you on the course with me. I provide a lot more detail than you may need or want. Since this is by far the longest race I've ever competed in, it's only natural the recap will be the longest I've ever written. So grab a beverage, sit back, get comfy, and enjoy.

I signed up for the Florida Double Anvil because my friend and teammate Dave Rodda asked if I would race with him. He had already completed a Double Anvil in Virginia a few weeks earlier. Before he even had completed his, I was doing research on it. After all, I had also considered doing UltraMan in Florida (slightly different format, a bit longer and stretched out over 3 days instead of 36 hours). So I wasn't doing it completely on a whim. Plus the success I had experienced at my first 100-mile race in Booneville gave me a small bit of confidence that I could finish in a somewhat respectable manner.

Although I had been successfully self-coaching myself the past two years, I was mostly training for running races. I wanted additional knowledge and perspective for long-course triathlon, so I enlisted the help of Ebe Boettcher with TCE Multisport. We started developing a plan in early November: admittedly not the most ideal time to start, but my run base was good, my swim form is solid, so we focused on a lot of bike work. 224 miles is a pretty daunting distance.



I was also familiar with the course, having competed in a sprint triathlon in the same venue - Lake Louisa State Park - two years earlier. A big difference this time was the weather. The first time I raced here it was typical Florida weather for March: temps in the low 80s and the ever-present humidity. Temps were similar when I arrived 3 days in advance of the race, but the forecast indicated a cold front moving through by race day/night. It would turn out to be worse than anyone expected.

THE SWIM. ALWAYS FUN

Race day morning wasn't too terrible: temps in the low 50s, and water temp of around 70 degrees, which meant I could go with my new sleeveless wetsuit and be comfortable. But the sand was extremely cold! I was curious to know how I would feel getting out of the water after a 4.8 mile swim.

Dave Rodda and I right before the start of the swim. We look so happy, unaware of how miserable we'd be later.



At 7:17am, the starting horn went off a bit suddenly and unceremoniously: most competitors looked around at each other slightly confused until someone yelled “GO! START SWIMMING!”

So off we went. I expected to be near the front and hoped to draft off one of the leaders while keeping things steady with good form. That was my plan. I settled in, got into that steady rhythm, and somehow by the second buoy, I was in front all by myself. I was leading a freaking ultra triathlon!

Dave had reminded me “There’s no medal for first out of the water,” and I was convinced I wouldn’t be. But at that moment - leading a race, with beautiful, calm water in front of me and the sun just starting to rise, doing a long-distance triathlon again for the first time in over 18 months - I was the happiest I had ever been in a race. “This must be what the pros feel like,” I thought to myself. That was quickly followed by “Enjoy it while you can,” and I focused on just completing the 12-lap course.

*A nice little fog hanging over the water - nice to help hide the gators!
Yes, they do reside in this lake, but there were no sightings of any that day.*

As you complete each lap near the beach, you have to stop and stand up briefly, look towards the timer’s table, and call out your name and number. For the first several laps, I was the first one back. I couldn’t believe it. Surely there was someone better out there who would use the strategy I had planned on - draft off a leader, save energy until the final lap or two then kick it up for the finish.

I knew there was someone not far back. I didn’t know who it was, but they had a neon pink swim cap on, so I nicknamed them Pinky. Pinky always seemed so be coming to turns just after I completed them. I got a mild surprise at lap 7 when Pinky came out of the water right after me and called their name to the timers, and I heard a woman’s voice. Whoever Pinky was, she was damn good!

Pinky gave good chase the rest of the way, and I kept telling myself I didn’t care if she passed me. But when I had reached lap 11, I changed my mind and was determined to lead the swim start to finish. I gave a bit extra on the final lap to ensure I was first out of the water, and unbelievably, I was. On my way to the changing area, I confirmed with the co-race director Teri that Pinky had just finished about 15 seconds behind me. I was glad I had given a little extra - at the moment.



First out of the water somehow!

There’s a changing area and bathrooms right at the beach, and that’s where I changed into my bibs and Wendy and Kaitlynn helped me get on the rest of my gear for the 224 bike ride. I initially thought leggings would be a good idea, but on my way to the bike I realized I was already pretty comfortable, the temps would be warming up, so why waste time stopping later to take them off? When I finally got on Phoenix (my bike’s name), I was told that Pinky had already beaten me to the start of the bike course. I had gotten ‘chicked’ already!

THE BIKE. 224 MILES OF EXCITEMENT



Heading out for 224 miles of fun!

No matter. I had my race plan to execute. I never expected to be first out of the water anyway, and I always expect to be passed on the bike. Surprisingly, I caught Pinky within 3 laps of the 6 mile out-and-back course, and at this point she had changed into what looked to me to be a brown-colored jersey. So of course, now her nickname was Brownie!

When I did get the lead back, it was only briefly. The eventual winner passed me not long after, and about an hour after that the eventual second place finisher also passed me. Around this time, everyone had finished the swim which meant there were over 30 competitors on a short course, and everyone was making stops for different reasons at different times. Some were for food and drink, some were for comfort, some were for mechanical, and some were for... let's say 'biological necessities.' That was where I had one advantage: I didn't get off my bike for those, I just did it while coasting when no one else was around. I know it sounds

gross to some, but when you're riding for over 14 hours, you save time whenever and however you can.

The rest of the breaks/pit stops happen where both the bike and run courses loop around at the start and finish area. It's 2 rows of tents called the AnVillage (clever). All competitors have an area assigned to them for their gear, food, and support crew. The nice thing about this is you come back to your crew every 20 to 30 minutes depending on your speed. Dave had arranged for us to be next to each other, which was great because on one side there was his crew - his daughter Reagan and his girlfriend Cindy and her daughter Mary - and on our other side was Kory and his wife Deanna. All of them would prove later to be just as helpful to my success as anyone else.

The problem with all the breaks happening at different times is it's difficult to know where you are relative to everyone else unless you're paying really close attention. And with 3 miles out and 3 miles back on a rather technical course, your mind is usually focused elsewhere. Also know that there is a 'Single Anvil' race going on simultaneously (what most would categorize as traditional long-distance, being 2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike ride, and 26 mile run). So combine different race distances with different racing strategies and different pit stops happening along the way, even if someone passes you, you don't know exactly where you are relative to them.

So just like the swim, I found my comfort zone and settled in. My plan was to go at least 56 miles before making a pit stop for solid foods. There was a bit of wind, and it never seemed to be favorable! But I reminded myself that the conditions were equal for everyone. Dave had told me that chatting with other racers made the day go by faster, so I did whenever I could. I got to know several racers that way, and I learned that Pinky/Brownie was named Jaelyn. She was from Long Island, racing with her teammate Kenny. I would try to chat with some of the participants from other countries, but the language barrier was sometimes too much to overcome when you only have a short time to chat.

I made my first stop as planned, and decided that those brief stops would be good if I had them more often (I had originally only planned on three). I was also giving my body a break: my neck was hurting, as was my left arm and shoulder. Deanna, at the table next to us, happened to be a personal trainer and they were far more prepared than we were! Deanna had all manners of quick therapy, including a foam roller. She correctly diagnosed it was my lat that was giving me issues, and invited me to try and roll it out. Holy hell, what PAIN! But it was helpful.

Even though the foam roller helped, and Wendy had put KT tape on my neck with some remote instruction from Ebe, the pain was still persistent enough that I decided to take two ibuprofen around 2pm. There's risks associated with it on endurance events, primarily kidney failure. But I was doing a great job staying hydrated, so it was a calculated risk.

Added together, all my stops on the bike - there were at least 5- would add a total of 1 hour and 20 minutes to my bike time. But they were necessary: I needed to re-apply some chamois balm, switch to a different pair of bike shorts with thicker padding, switch lenses on my helmet, put on warmer (and drier!) socks, plus add another layer and swap out a headlight when the sun went down.

Ah yes, the sun going down. That brought some incredibly drastic temperature changes. Once the sun went down, the temps followed and fast. I was still somewhat comfortable, but it wouldn't last much longer. I did not want to put the leggings on until I was close to finishing the ride because, you know... 'biological necessities' were a time-saver and I didn't want to ruin my leggings before starting the run! I remember Sara Cooper saying when she did Race Across America that her strategy was to sleep and nap less than everyone else. I was going to try and do the same: eliminate unnecessary stops as much as possible.

Our Florida friends Cris and Cristine Rowe showed up with their oldest daughter Riley around 7pm to support and help crew so Wendy and Kailynn could take a break. When I made a long-ish stop to change into dry socks and tape up my bike shoes to keep some air out, Cris suggested that I put on his boots to warm up my toes. It sounded crazy, but I'll tell you what - it was the most ingenious thought anyone came up with that night!

I saw a lot of creative things during the race. Michal Ortiz had to ride with a portable charger taped to his aero bars because his Garmin started to die on him. Dave Rodda rode with at least two headlights that I could see because he wasn't sure if one would last the night. I should have borrowed his idea, because sure enough - at around 10pm, in the pitch black of this state park with no streetlights and no moonlight, my headlight died. There was no one around me to 'borrow' light from either. I ended up riding over a mile with blinding oncoming lights from other racers, but had nothing except the white line at the side of the road to guide me. Finally near the turnaround, I caught Karen - the oldest woman to have completed a Double Anvil race - and stayed safe behind her until someone a little faster came along, then I got behind them and finally back to the AnVillage to swap a new, fully-charged headlight. That dark part was a bit scary, I'm not gonna lie.

Not long after that, my bike computer said it had a low battery. CRAP! All these issues! So I made another unscheduled pit stop, and Cris hooked up my portable charger, putting both it and my computer in my back jersey pocket. The only downside was I didn't have any data for how fast I was going or how much power I was pushing, but I was already past 150 miles and was mostly dialed in at that point.

After 10 hours on the bike and darkness settling in, one way I kept my mind engaged was keeping track of how the runners were doing. Remember, there's a shorter race going on at the same time, so all of those racers were off their bikes before the sun went down. I gave thumbs-up and a smile each time to all of them, including Will who is turning 60 this year and doing 60 Iron-distance races in 12 months Talk about amazing! I was also giving huge props to Tanya, who we met at the pre-race dinner the night before. She said she was a runner first and foremost, and she wasn't kidding! Holy cow, she was flying on the run and looking great! She would race all the way up to second place overall in the Single Anvil - what a competitor!

Eventually there came a point when all the single Anvil competitors were finished, and there were only double participants on the course. That made it easier to tell where I was overall, since we all started at

the same time. I saw one, then two people on the run course. At that point I figured I was at least two hours behind the leader, and one hour behind second place. Again, as Dave had told me: "Anything can happen on the run. You never know at this distance." First things first, though - I had to finish this bike ride.

Before the race started, I had a best-case scenario of being off the bike before midnight with a solid swim and bike. With 4 laps to go, I realized that I had made too many stops, and that wasn't going to happen. But I was close: I would get off the bike around 12:20am Saturday morning, becoming the third participant to get on the run course.

THE RUN. THE LONG, PAINFUL RUN.

My feet were freezing after riding for 6 hours in the night chill, even with my bike shoes taped up and hopping into Cris's boots earlier. I got into the SUV we rented, cranked up the heat, and let my feet thaw out to the point when I could feel my toes again. It took longer than I wanted, but now... NOW I was ready to run!

Damn it felt good to be running. Again, I had a plan, and that was to run the first 26 miles, then wait for the inevitable slowing to occur on the next 26. When I started out, my pacing felt good and right where I hoped to be, averaging around 10 minute miles. Perfect. But I wasn't totally physically comfortable. I was sacrificing comfort for speed, and that would prove to be a big mistake later on.



Bundled up and ready to run!

When I stopped after 12 miles, I tried making some wardrobe changes to address the comfort. They didn't work. In fact they made me feel much worse and slowed me down. I had to walk most of the next two laps - each lap being 1 mile out and 1 mile back - giving my legs a break until I could find a pace I could maintain again. I got back into it around mile 15, and I kept it for a while, but each lap was getting slower.

After the 24th mile, I switched shoes to my more comfortable but worn Altra Escalantes. Oh. My. GAWD. They made all the difference in the world! Even though 10 minute miles weren't going to happen again, I found a pace that worked that was in the 11's. But running straight through to the finish wasn't an option anymore either.

I tried chatting again with other competitors. It was a bit of a challenge in the dark, you couldn't always see the face of the person you were talking to due to their headlamp. And sometimes you couldn't recognize someone until you were right up on them. This made for some struggles with the competitors from other countries who knew minimal English. But I did have a lot of conversations with Michelle from Guatemala, Rob from Palm Beach, and every time I saw Jacklyn (aka Pinky/Brownie) and her teammate Kenny - both from Long Island - we'd always have a fun exchange. Kenny had a fantastic attitude the entire race and kept things as light-hearted as possible. Eric from Fort Collins was a fantastic motivator for everyone, pairing up with anyone who wanted company and conversation.

Still, everyone was fighting both the cold as well as the physical toll. My feet hurt, along with my ankles, calves, and knees. Mentally I was still focused and my nutrition was going very well, but the discomfort was getting to me. I wanted to take more ibuprofen, but knew there was a real danger of doing kidney damage if I took too much. I asked Deanna what she had heard about the dangers of ibuprofen and

endurance athletes, and she confirmed what I had heard: don't take it unless you have to. So I sucked it up and motored on.

It was tough for everyone at this point, racers and crew and staff alike. The USA Ultra Triathlon staff was doing a great job staying upbeat, but crews were having a tougher go. It's easy to understand why: their athlete would come through every 25 to 40 minutes. Crews are freezing. Just about the time they get warm and comfy, their athlete comes through again needing something.

And of course the crew isn't exercising non-stop like the athletes. If it had been warmer, they would have all been just tired. But add cold to that, and it makes things miserable. Every single crew member deserves huge props for staying through the night!



Crew trying to stay warm and awake.

Another expectation I had going in was to do the run in under 11 hours, which would have me finish somewhere around 28 hours or less.. When the daylight finally started returning around 6am, I knew that wasn't likely. So I re-evaluated. My new goal was to try and finish in under 29 hours. That would be an amazing achievement for my first ultra triathlon. Barring anything catastrophic happening, that should be good enough for third place.

Easier said than done, though. Even though I didn't show it, I was in great discomfort. But I knew everyone else was too. What was really amazing was that even after all this time, nearly all the competitors were still out there. At a certain point, you're not even competing against anyone else anymore: you're competing against yourself. How much do you want it? How much discomfort - how much pain - can you tolerate? How much can you convince your body to keep moving forward when rest is so welcome? I had to frequently play in my mind the song that I adopted as my theme song for this race, "Whatever It Takes" by Imagine Dragons. Specifically the line "I was born to run, I was born for this."

Dave had rejoined the race by then. He had an extremely challenging night. I was really happy to see him back out on the course. He's a strong runner and I knew he just needed to be out there clicking off laps. We kept encouraging each other as we had the entire race.

At this point the pain was just a constant that I internalized. I kept reminding myself that good form leads to faster, easier splits with less wear. It must have worked, because nearly every person who saw me commented on how good I was still looking (I told many of them to go get their eyes checked!). When I had less than 10 miles to go I knew I could come close to staying under 29 hours. I just had to minimize the breaks for water and walking. With 6 miles to go I started ignoring my watch and just ran (ok, more like lightly jogged/shuffled) as comfortably as I could. With 3 miles to go I knew I was going to do it. I was going to finish a freaking ultra-triathlon.

One of the great things about smaller races like this is they encourage family and crew to share the finish with you. I was lucky enough to have been welcomed by Simon's crew when he finished his UltraMan. I had not only Wendy and Kaitlynn, but The Rows had returned and were waiting for me at the finish as well. As I started the final lap, I asked all of them who was going to cross the line with me. I let them figure it out while I ran the last 2 miles.

When I came around the last turn and into view of the finish chute, I saw them all waiting for me and they started cheering. Kaitlynn was waiting to hand me the American flag, and it all brought tears to my eyes. As I got closer they started playing the national anthem, as they do for all finishers. I would later learn I was the first American to finish - talk about a sense of patriotic pride! Kaitlynn handed me the flag, and she and Wendy ran alongside me the last 100 yards or so to the finish. I could have floated at that point.



Finishing with Wendy & Kaitlynn.

The whole USA Ultra Triathlon crew was on hand to see me across the line, taking video and photos. The race director Steve Kirby came over and gave me an engraved hammer to hit the ceremonial anvil with - twice, since I had finished the double. The two rings from my strikes may have been the sweetest sounds I had heard in a long time.

After that, a lot of sweaty hugs. Kenny and Jaclyn happened to come through the area not long after, and I was able to give them both hugs of appreciation. I was disappointed they would not be able to attend the luncheon the next day, they unknowingly were pushing me most of the run and I wanted more time to thank them both for that. They still had a few more laps to go, though. I wish I had been able to stay around and see them and everyone else finish. But once you're done, you just want to go somewhere and relax.

As I sit here thinking back to the finish, about what the entire experience meant to me, I'm overcome with emotion again. I said it at the luncheon the following day and could barely get out the words - at least typing them out I only have to squint through tears of appreciation:

I've always considered myself a lucky guy. I'm lucky because of my beautiful, wonderful, supportive family in Wendy and Kaitlynn. I'm lucky to have a great friend and teammate in Dave and the TCE Multisport Team. I'm lucky to live a life that allows me the time to balance training for events like this along with work and family. That's a lot of luck right there.

This past week, if it were possible, I became luckier still.

I lucked out with having a teammate who had gone through it before and helped prepare me. I lucked out being next to him and his crew, and on the other side having a great couple from Ohio in Kory and Deanna. I lucked out having Jacklyn push me throughout the race. Most of all, I lucked out signing up for a race that had - top to bottom - the nicest, most supportive people both on the course, on the sidelines, and behind the scenes.



How did one guy deserve to be so damn lucky?