

Odyssey Double IRON Support Crew Report

September 2002 by Aaron Schwartzbard

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Chris who rode a yellow bike. She rode up hills and down streets and in the cold and through the summer. She rode in the morning and in the night and in the sun and in the rain. When she rode as far as she wanted to go, she would run. Sometimes, she would swim, too. Then, there came a time when she said to herself, "I do believe I could swim and ride and run all day long, and all night long, and through the next day too!" So that's exactly what she did.

Chapter 1

I forget exactly when she asked me to be her support crew, but it was probably about a year ago. Since then, we've been planning. Every ride, every race, every dinner has included some discussion about the event that became known to us simply as "The Double." The Double was the Double IRON race that would take place at Lake Anna State Park in Virginia in early September, 2002. Chris had done the swim for the Double IRON as part of a relay several years ago, and since then, she had been a volunteer with the organization that runs the race. She knew how the race worked, and she had a pretty good idea of what to expect come race day.

However, every athlete is different. The food or strategy or equipment that works for one person could cause a disaster for another person. So while Chris had a pretty good idea of HOW to plan for race day, it would take many long discussions and a great deal of consideration to figure out WHAT to plan for race day. The questions ranged from the obvious --- What food could she tolerate for an event that would last more than 24 hours? How much rest would she need? What kind of pace should she try to hold? --- to the obscure --- What kind of lighting system should she use on her bike to get her through the night? What kind of socks will keep her feet most comfortable through the Double marathon? Where on the course should we set up her aid station?

To understand the task of preparing for such a race, it's important to understand the format of the race itself. Like shorter triathlons, the event starts with the swim, then comes the bike, and the last event is the run. That it is a "Double IRON" does not mean that the events are cycled through twice. Rather, each of the distances is doubled: 4.8 mile swim, 22.4 mile bike, 52.4 mile run. Also, as is common in multi-Iron distance races, the course is small, and the race is done in a lap format. In this case, a length of the swim was a little more than 100 meters, the bike was 7.4 miles, and the run was a mile out, and a mile back (with the extra .4 mile added to the end). Thus, the athletes would do 33 laps of the swim course, 30 laps of the bike course, and 26 laps of the run course. The lap format is convenient, since it would be difficult to provide aid to athletes if they were spread over a 281.2 mile course. And that brings us to the biggest difference between this event, and shorter events. The rules for multi-Iron races are a bit different from the rules of shorter races. Outside assistance is permitted --- in this race, there were no official aid stations other than a few cups of water and Gatorade at the run turn-around --- and pacers are allowed on the course.

Knowing all of the above details about the race, Chris spent many months experimenting with her

training and racing, ever the scientist, collecting data about what worked and what didn't work. I spent those months trying to absorb as much information as I could about what she determined, and whenever I could, I offered suggestions or observations. Through all of our discussions of logistics and strategies, we would often branch off into discussions about why we do what we do, how we handle the pain when things get bad, how we enjoy the satisfaction when things are good. Devoting so much time to a single goal, it seemed that we both wanted to understand the draw. It also seemed that we both understood that there would come a time in this race when all energy would be spent, when the muscles would no longer be willing to contract and release, when the body would reach the point of fatigue at which the single force remaining to keep her moving forward would be sheer will-power. Without motivation, there is no will-power, so understanding the motivation became as important as understanding how to ride a bike.

In the final weeks before the race, everything seemed to be falling into place. Chris was feeling good about her preparation, and I was feeling confident that I was going to be able to do all my duties (of course, if I had any questions, I could refer to the seven pages of typed notes that she had prepared). Then, Chris got the call from the State Department. After 10 months of waiting (during which, she was not allowed to work), several trips out of the country, countless calls to the INS to get information (which were usually fruitless, since the INS refuses to answer questions), and a huge amount of emotional stress, somewhere from on-high came the decision that despite the fact that she was from the hostile nation of New Zealand, and despite the fact that she could only make marginal contributions to society with a PhD in molecular biology from Cambridge, she could get her work visa. However, there was one last catch: you have to be coming from someplace else to get a visa, so she would have to leave the country to receive it.

Because of other constraints in her life, the week before The Double was the only time she could leave the country to get her visa. Because she had not been permitted to work for 10 months, she couldn't afford a plane ticket on short notice, so she would have to drive to the American embassy in Ottawa to get the visa. Finally, to make matters all the worse (but keeping in line with the nightmare of the previous 10 months of trying to deal with the INS), once she got to the American embassy, the people at the embassy could STILL refuse to give her the visa, in which case, she would not be allowed back into the country. (If that happened, it was going to be my duty to gather all of her worldly possessions, and try to figure out how to get them back to New Zealand.)

So in the four days before the race, leaving late Tuesday afternoon, she had to make the 1200 mile round-trip drive to Ottawa and back. Fortunately, they gave her the visa, and let her back into the country. She arrived at home on Friday, shortly before noon. I showed up a little later. The time had come. We filled my car to capacity with all the gear we could possibly need for the weekend, and set off to Lake Anna State Park. There would be one more night of sleep before the race. During that last afternoon, making those final preparation, we both found ourselves totally, amazingly calm. Chris would have one job: keep moving forward. I would have one job: get Chris to the finish line. We were ready, and we both knew it.

Chapter 2

The race start was about 10 minutes late. The 15 athletes who were competing in the Double IRON were standing in stomach-deep water, ready to swim 33 laps around the swim course. From somewhere else on the beach, we heard a countdown, "60 SECONDS LEFT... 30 SECONDS

LEFT... 15 SECONDS... 10 SECONDS... 3... 2... 1.. GO!!!" Suddenly, a couple hundred athletes competing in a half ironman came running down the beach, and into the water (they were swimming a different course). The Double IRON athletes stood their ground, wondering when it would be time for them to start. A minute later, one of the race officials wandered over, and asked someone why they were just standing there. "GO! GO! That was the start!" He yelled. Everyone was pretty amused by the initial confusion. After all, a minute or two won't make much of a difference.

At one end of the course, two volunteers sat in a canoe, counting laps for each of the athletes. I had two jobs during the swim: I had to record laps and times for Chris (just in case one of the official lap counters missed a lap), and I had to make sure she had enough to consume. Every fourth lap --- approximately every kilometer --- I would wade out to one end of the swim course with a bottle of water, a bottle of Cytomax, and a flask of hammer gel. She would drink a little, have a little gel, then start another four laps.

Everything went very smoothly through the swim. Her first lap was the slowest, as she was getting warmed up, but each lap after that took just about the same amount of time as every other lap. At the end, when she came out of the water, she was in great shape. I walked with her up to her bike, where she changed into her bike gear, and started her 224 mile ride. After she left, I looked at my watch, and realized that she had a five minute transition --- not bad even for much shorter races!

During the swim, I had thought that once her ride started, I would get a chance to relax a bit since each lap would take some time on the order of 25-35 minutes. However, as soon as she was riding, I realized that there was a slew of tasks I needed to do. We had set up a base on the course not far from one of the bike turn-arounds. Chris would be able to call out what she needed while going downhill to the turn around, and I would have about two minutes to get into position with whatever she wanted, to do the hand-off while she was coming up the hill. For that to work, I had to have all of the food and extra supplies at our camp, and everything would need to be well organized. Most of the supplies were still in the car. I decided that I'd be best able to get around on rollerblades, so I put on my skates, started loading a bag with the most essential items, and made the first of many trips between the car and the camp.

I only had time to make two trips before I decided that I needed to start organizing the gear that I had fetched. At the same time, I had another friend, Eileen, doing the Triple IRON at the same time. One of her bikes had some problems with the brakes, and the other bike had problems with the rear derailleur. I wanted to take a couple minutes to see if I could fix some of her bike problems. And then there was the issue of MY needs --- I had been sitting in the sun for several hours already with hardly anything to drink or eat. I would be of little use to anyone if I started having nutrition problems (hey, this was going to be quite an endurance event for me too!).

For Chris' first four or five laps of the bike, I was running and rollerblading and biking hither and fro, and quite often, hither again, trying to keep everything in order, to stay one step ahead of Chris' needs, to make sure I was getting enough to eat and drink, to help other athletes and support crews whenever I could, and ALWAYS keeping one eye on my watch to make sure that I'd be in position whenever Chris passed.

Eventually, everything seemed to be in order. Almost all of the gear was where it needed to be, and Chris had established a good rhythm. I tried to keep a bottle of water and a bottle of sports drink ready and cold, along with a full flask of gel, so I wouldn't have to rush at the last minute preparing

what she requested. Occasionally, she'd throw me a curve-ball, and I'd have to scurry to get it together. At one point, as I handed her a bottle of water, she said she'd like a margarine sandwich on her next lap. I knew that we had some margarine in the kitchen by the lake, and I knew we had some white bread in the tent. I pulled on my skates, zipped over to the kitchen to grab the margarine, went back to the tent, and started to put something together. But how do you make a margarine sandwich? How much margarine? Open face or closed face? Is this something she's going to eat as she rides away, or will she need it cut into pieces, and put into a plastic baggie? Certainly, if I got it wrong, worlds would not end, but it doesn't take a major catastrophe to ruin a race.

The cumulative effect of many little mistakes can bring a race to an early end. During the 281.2 miles of this race, there would be plenty of time for little mistakes to accumulate. So if I had to obsess about what might have been mundane details in other circumstances, I was going to obsess. I knew how much Chris had put into this race just to get to the starting line, and I knew that there remained an astounding amount of work and suffering between her and the finish line. She had enough faith and trust in me that she was willing to place a significant portion of the responsibility for getting her through this race on me. I had no doubt that she had the physical and mental strength to go the distance. The only thing that could stop her would be the little mistakes along the way that I was supposed to recognize before they happened, and prevent.

So this is how it would be: a very small amount of margarine (because I feared too much would make her ill), not cut into pieces (because she could always rip it into pieces if needed), and I would meet her with a second piece of bread (in case she wanted it closed-face) and a baggie (in case she wanted to take it along with her). On the loop after I gave her the sandwich, she told me, "A little more margarine next time." Good, that's all I would have expected to hear. I took note for future reference.

Chapter 3

By late afternoon, everything was going well. Chris had had a short slump (which is to be expected from time to time), but we got her eating more, and she bounced back. Chris' roommate, Jen, had arrived midday, and Chris was happy to see her. I was happy to see her, too, since she provided an extra set of hands around the camp. Between the two of us, everything was ready for Chris well before she needed it. I knew that everything was good at camp; I wanted to make sure that everything was okay on the course. The next time Chris came around, I asked if she would mind some company on the following lap. She said that would be fine.

She enjoyed having some company. We chatted about how things were going (things were going well). It was clear that riding with someone else made the time pass more easily. The only problem was that we would get so wrapped up in talking that she would forget to eat at her designated eating points on the course. (She assured me that she was eating when I didn't come along.) But that was not a problem, since I was more than happy to nag... er, I mean remind her to eat. At the end of that lap, I dropped off at the camp, and let her go through the turn-around so I could grab another bottle of water for her.

A couple laps later, I came along with her again. At this point, the sun was close to setting. We had scheduled a break for the end of this lap, and that worked out well, since it was time to put the lights

on the bike. Tri-bikes are not designed to take lights. This bike was no exception. Fortunately, we had gone through a dry run of putting the lights on the bike, so I knew how to get it to fit. Chris took the minute or two to stretch, and grab a bite to eat. Then she was off again.

Between the time she left for that lap, and the time she returned, the sun set, and riders merged into the blackness of the road and trees, only visible as points of bright, white light as they approached, and blinking red lights as they departed. Not wanting to use any of the good bike lights on my bike, but still wanting my own lighting system, I attached my headlamp to my helmet (sweet, sweet, duct tape!). After a few more laps, while heading toward the turn-around, she asked me to come along for another lap. It was starting to get chilly, so I grabbed Chris' arm warmers and her cycling vest. I didn't know if she'd want any more clothes, so I asked Jen to pick them up if I dropped them. Once Chris was out-bound again, I asked if she wanted her vest or arm warmers. She didn't want either, so I dropped them, and headed off with her.

Being many miles from any population center, the park gets very, very dark. The night is framed by points of light. The sky is brilliant with stars that seem to grow in numbers as you stare upward, bisected by the arch of the Milky Way. The gate to the park is closed, so the only traffic to be seen was the series of headlamps and bike lights moving silently up one side of the road, and down the other. The bike course was lined with tiki torches, spaced twenty meters apart along one side of the road. As I rode my first lap in full darkness with Chris, volunteers were placing candles in small, brown paper bags along the run course (which overlapped the bike course). Taken together, the stars and the torches and the candles, the absence of visible landmarks, the procession of individuals who were no longer distinguishable from one another, the almost trance-like state achieved by athletes engaged in this repetitive activity for hours and hours, all of those elements combined to transform this event from a race to what felt like a religious rite. We had become some sort of latter day whirling dervishes.

At the end of that lap, Chris asked me to ride another with her. We took the lap to discuss the approaching transition. She had less than 40 miles left on the bike. We went over the list of things she would need, and we discussed how we'd do it. Originally, she had planned to start out of T2 running, but at this point it seemed to make more sense to take the first lap walking. After being on the bike for so long, it would take a little while to adjust to a different sort of motion. By the end of the lap on the bike, I felt that I had my mental list prepared (and if there were any questions, I could always refer back to her notes). I peeled off from Chris when we passed the camp site. Chris had four more laps to go. The plan was that I would take one lap to locate everything she needed, and gather it all, I'd ride two more laps with her, then, during her final lap, I would set up her T2. Jen was still awake, so I asked if she would mind staying awake through T2, which would be about two hours later. She said that she had been planning on it. Excellent, everything was in order.

Chris came around again, and I rode two more laps with her. At the end of the second lap, I said to her, "You've done so much to get here, and now, you're doing it, and you're doing it so well! Enjoy this last lap. Take your time. Forget about everything other than your success. This one is all yours." I came to a stop in front of our camp site, laid down my bike behind the tent, and started scurrying about, preparing for T2. On the last lap, she requested a ham and margarine sandwich. This time, I knew how much margarine to use. I buttered some bread, and gave it to Jen. I changed into my running clothes, since I planned on doing a significant portion of the run with Chris. Then Jen and I filled our arms with everything we needed, and headed to the transition area.

I set up the transition area as Chris and I discussed. One of the race volunteers started giving me a

hard time (jokingly) about hot chocolate. "Chris REEEAAALLLLLYYYY want some hot chocolate. If you don't have some waiting for her, she's going to be TERRIBLY disappointed!" Though I knew that Chris didn't have her heart set on hot chocolate, I figured that there must have been some words exchanged about it the last time she passed the turn-around point. "I hope you have that hot chocolate waiting for her. She said that's all she wanted." Hmm. I did one last mental check of all the gear. Everything was in order. Time check: I expected Chris to get back to this point in five minutes. That gave me five minutes to organize this whole hot chocolate thing. I'd be taking a chance, since I'd have to run uphill about 300 meters back to the campsite to locate a mug that I hadn't seen all day. I didn't want Chris to finish the ride while I was someplace else. But hot chocolate is soooooo go. Yeah, gotta do the hot chocolate thing. I sprinted to the kitchen, where Jen had located some ham for the sandwich. I told her to find some hot chocolate, and to start making it. At full bore, I then sprinted up the hill to the tent, rifled through two or three bags before finding the mug, I turn around and sprinted back down the hill to the kitchen just as fast as my little legs would carry me to deliver the mug to Jen, then back out to the transition area. Less than a minute later, Chris arrived.

Chapter 4

Chris' original plan had her arriving at T2 somewhere around 2:00am, Sunday morning. I didn't catch her exact arrival time, but it was sometime between 1:55am and 2:00am. Everything was going perfectly. The swim had been great. Chris had spent almost all of the ride with a smile on her face, in great spirits. No problems there. Now it was time for the run. We both knew that it would get rough on the run.

Long triathlons --- whatever "long" may mean to any individual --- have three parts: Discipline, Patience, and Courage. The swim is Discipline. The day is just beginning, and although you may have the fitness to move ahead a bit faster, that is not part of the plan. Maintain good form; move through the water with grace and fluidity. The bike is Patience. Usually, more than half of the race happens on the bike. You will be riding for a long time. Get used to it. Accept the distance and let it happen. The run is Courage. To have finished so many miles in the water, and on the bike, then to start a foot race is to face your own ability to persevere. It is like jumping off the cliff, or entering the dragon's lair. Facing what might be ahead, and still moving forward, determined to reach the finish line despite whatever feelings you may have during the journey requires a personal strength that has no better name than Courage.

Chris changed her clothes, Jen stood by with the sandwich and hot chocolate, I wiped off her feet, making sure there were no particles that could cause blisters. After 10 minutes, we were moving again. As we were leaving, I grabbed Chris' bike, which I would leave at the tent. I asked Jen to grab whatever else she could carry, and not to worry about the rest. I could clean up later. I just wanted Jen to get some sleep --- out of the three of us, I wanted at least one of us to be in reasonable shape when this event was over.

Chris and I walked the first lap. One mile out, one mile back. Only 25 laps left. We started running during the second lap. The rest of the laps were a mixture of mostly running, with some walking on the uphills. I liked the pace. We were going fast enough that we wouldn't have to worry about time limits, but still holding back enough that I knew Chris would be able to get through the Double marathon. We established a pattern that when we would get close to the camp, near the end of a lap,

I would ask Chris if she wanted anything to eat or drink. Then, I would run ahead to the camp, prepare what ever was needed, and catch up with Chris either before or just after the end of the lap.

After a few laps, I started to feel my feet. I haven't really done any running over the past two months due to an injury. I just started running on the roads again a week before this race, easing back into running very cautiously. Having spent so much time on my feet over the past day, my feet were starting to feel tender, and I felt the slight twinge of the injury in my foot that prevented me from running for so long. I also had to use the toilet, and I wanted to gather any of Chris' gear that might still be in T2. I decided that I should really take a break to assess the situation with my feet, and address those other issues. I told Chris that I was going to take a break, and when we passed the tent, I stopped. As I saw her continue, I realized that she was getting rather sleepy, and this would not be a good time to leave her. T2 and the toilet could wait, but I didn't want to push my foot. I grabbed my rollerblades, pulled them on as quickly as I could, and caught up with her.

At some point during the three laps I did on my rollerblades, we passed the leader of the Triple Iron, which was happening on the same course, but had started 24 hours before the Double. The leader of the Triple, another Chris (it seems that half of the people in the park that weekend were named Chris), was running with his sister. As they passed, his sister said most matter-of-factly, "Chris is on his last lap." She wasn't bragging, or celebrating. She was just letting us know, as a courtesy to competitors who had shared a course for so many hours that we had come to care about each other like friends and family. Chris was on his last lap.

That moment struck me as much as any other moment of the weekend. I felt that I had just emerged from under a bodhi tree, enlightened. Chris had started his race 45 hours before this moment. After so many hours of traveling up and down this road, he was still moving. How much mental strength must it take to achieve that accomplishment? How much physical ability? Most people will never have the slightest inkling of an idea that such a feat is possible. Only a small handful of people in this world will ever know firsthand. Of the greatest ultra-distance triathletes whose names appear in magazines and websites, and who dominate television coverage of the Hawaii Ironman, who among them could complete a Triple IRON? Who among them could do it in 45 hours? And even if some of them could do it, perhaps the more telling question is, who among them WOULD? We are not talking about the momentary discomfort of a 100 meter sprint or a 10K race. We are not even talking about the half-day of an Ironman.

Forty-five hours. Is that any less impressive than anything Michael Jordan ever did? Tiger Woods? I felt at that moment, I was watching a world-class athletic performance. Yet, I wasn't really watching it. We were still enveloped in the pitch-black of night, so by the time I could turn around to offer my congratulations, he had already disappeared into the darkness, heading to the finish line, where he would be met by the five or six volunteers who were awake, and counting laps. This man who had just accomplished something so amazing that most people wouldn't even be able to begin to comprehend it would finish in the darkness of night, to some polite, if sleepy, applause. Photographers would not surround him, clamoring to get the picture of him opening a bottle of champagne. There would be no three foot tall trophy, no giant check for First Place. Because he needed to get cleaned up, get some rest, and get to an airport, he would not even be able stay long enough to attend the post-race dinner, where he would be surrounded by the members of a very small community of athletes who could truly appreciate his accomplishment, and bestow upon him the accolades he deserves. Aside from a small plaque, the only award he would receive would be whatever satisfaction he could derive from his accomplishment.

That was the enlightenment I had sought... that I have been seeking for so long: enduring all that must be endured to achieve goals so great as this attracts me not because I yearn to reach the heights of fame and fortune. The attraction is that as the accomplishments grow greater and greater, the satisfaction becomes deeper and deeper. Because of what we see on TV, we become confused, and start to believe that greatness is accompanied by television cameras and multi-year product endorsement contracts and large houses on hills overlooking crystal blue water. That sort of "greatness" will only ever be known by a small percentage of the population who happen to be at a certain place at a certain time with certain abilities. The rest of us have the good fortune not to be so distracted. Each time I surpass my previous self-expectations, I learn that there is a satisfaction that is more deeply internal than what I had known before. Now, I've learned that it can go far deeper than I had ever realized. It can go so deep that it can drive someone to swim, bike, and run 421.8 miles in 45 hours in a small park in the middle of Virginia, to finish almost anonymously, then to leave in the middle of the night without fanfare or celebration. That, to me, is greatness.

As I contemplated such weighty issues, we continued to move forward. At the end of my third lap on rollerblades, stars were starting to disappear, and the eastern horizon was giving hints of the pending sunrise. The sun would rise during the next lap, and that would wake up Chris, and give her a second wind. This was as good a time as any to take care of other business. At the end of the lap, I took off my skates, and let her go ahead by herself. At the transition area, I found that Jen had taken all of Chris' gear back to camp. Good, that's less for me to do. I went to the restroom. On the toilet, I looked at the time and decided that I had a little while before I had to get back to the run course. I crossed my arms on my knees, and put my head on my arms to rest for a moment. I looked at my watch again, because I had grown accustomed to keeping a very close eye on the time when I wasn't standing somewhere on the course. Somehow, three minutes had gone by. I had fallen asleep for three minutes, sitting on a toilet.

I ran back to the tent, and by the time Chris returned, the sky was blue. Finally, we could see who was left on the course. The other competitors had changed from silhouettes into people. Now that everyone had a face, we could offer one another a smile, a wave, encouragement to keep going, admiration for having gone for so long already. Passing each person twice per lap, and understanding the sort of strength it took to keep going, we became a family, each wanting everyone else to succeed.

Chapter 5

We had decided that at the half-way point, Chris would stop to stretch and change her shoes. The prospect of that brief respite kept her going for the last few laps. After thirteen laps, having completed the first marathon, she stopped. It was only five minutes before she was moving again to start the final marathon of this journey. To think of everything that had come to pass, and to realize that only thirteen laps of the run course remained was thrilling. At the same time, I knew how tired I was, and I knew that Chris had done much, much more. There was still a marathon between us and the finish line. It was easy to vacillate between believing we were almost there, and believing that a long, long road was ahead.

Chris had remained in amazingly good spirits through the race so far. When people said to her, "Lookin' good!" or, "Lookin' strong!" they weren't offering encouragement so much as they were expressing surprise that someone could still be smiling. During the second marathon, though she

was still moving forward consistently, the race was starting to wear on her. She declared, "if I had a mortal enemy who I wanted to torture in the most heinous way possible, I would make him do this." She confided, "don't get me wrong, I don't regret doing this... But I hope I never feel the need to do it again." (Both sentiments, I knew, would quickly fade from memory on the other side of the finish line.)

It was all I could do to try to convince her that she was in great shape. Her lap times were consistent, and she had plenty of time to finish the race. As we started the 17th lap, I noted that at the next lap, we should start counting down. "We have 10 laps left; starting with the next lap, we'll be on the single digit countdown!" Even as I said it, I started doing the math. Ten laps left, that's still 20 miles. Not a small distance. Between walking and running, we were taking a hair over 30 minutes per lap. Holding that pace, we'd be on our feet for another five hours. Chances were that we would get slower, and take closer to six hours to finish. Were we close to done? The question didn't even make sense anymore. Realizing how far we had to go, I reached a low point. I didn't want to be out there either. However, as tired as I was feeling, I hadn't gone nearly as far as Chris. I looked around at the other athletes shuffling back and forth along the run course. They inspired me. Could I be as strong as they were? I like to think so. That meant that I had to face the remaining five or six hours, and just continue moving.

As the sun burned off the fog that had kept the morning cool, I started to worry that the heat of the day would make eating difficult. At the end of each lap, I tried to phrase my questions in such a way that I would get the information I needed. If we were doing okay with calories, I might ask, "Do you want anything to eat?" If I thought it might be time to eat, I'd ask, "Could you eat something?" If I started to worry about how much she was eating, I'd ask, "What could you eat now?" The biggest hit of the day was the jelly sandwich rolls: A piece of white bread with a bit of margarine, and a dollop of jelly, so she could roll it up, and eat it like a burrito. It provided a lot of calories, and they seemed to agree with her. Just grabbing a flask of gel was much easier for me, but by late in the race, I had gotten jelly sandwich production down to a science. I could run ahead, grab the supplies I needed, make the sandwich, then run (being careful not to drop any jelly!) to catch up with her just as she reached the run turn-around.

Unfortunately, even as we were counting down the single digit laps remaining, the mood was not improving. The only positive reaction I could elicit would come when, at the end of a lap, I would point out that we hadn't slowed at all. Somehow, through everything, we were holding an incredibly consistent pace. Each time I noted (to the surprise of both of us) that our pace hadn't dropped, Chris offered the morbid laugh of someone who had just been told an ironic piece of trivia concerning the gallows to which he was being led. We were still running most of each lap. Some laps we would walk more than others, but when we walked more, we ended up unintentionally running faster.

Outbound on a lap, a good friend of Chris, who happens also to be named Chris (but I'll call him Chris F. to keep things straight), said that if I'd like to take a break, he'd be happy to do a few laps. The truth is, I was ready for a break. But after all the time I had spent trying to convince Chris that there really wasn't so much left, I couldn't stop, saying, "Phew, that's exhausting. I'm going to rest for a while, but you need to keep going." I told him that I was going to continue running, but it'd be nice to have a bit more company. After all, Chris and I had been walking and running for something like 10 hours. Before that, we had ridden together for several hours. We had spent the day before the race registering, setting up camp, and taking care of last minute preparations. We had run out of things to discuss. We needed a new perspective. I hoped Chris F. would join us, because I knew that he could add exactly what we needed. When we got back to that point, he was ready to go. Since he

hadn't been with us before, Chris F. probably didn't realize what a difference he made. Since she was so focused on moving forward Chris might not have recognized what a difference he made either. But to me, the difference was like day and night. She was talking again, laughing a bit more.

Even though there were still several hours ahead of us, I knew we had made it. A few people had already finished. Those of us still on the course were cheering for each other. It seems that every one of us was keeping track of the laps remaining of everyone else --- not because of any sort of competition, but because we had become friends for the weekend, and we cared about how our friends were progressing. Six laps left, then five, then four, then three... I remember thinking at the beginning of the race, at the end of the third lap, in the early hours of the morning, that we had hardly begun. At this point, only three laps remained.

"Chris, could you eat a jelly sandwich?"

"If I have to."

"I'll get you a jelly sandwich on this lap, you can skip eating on the next lap, then have a little gel on the last lap. Then you're done. How does that sound?"

"Yeah, that sounds good."

At the beginning of the 25th lap, with two laps remaining, she admitted that she had gotten to the point where she knew she had made it. That's a point that we had discussed many times. I call it the "Crawl It In" point. In a long race, anything can happen. Early in the day, the question is, "Can I do this?" Over time, the situation unfolds, and the answer becomes clear. Eventually, it becomes only a matter of extrapolation to determine if you can do it. I had known that Chris could do this race for a long time. So had she. But just because you CAN do it, doesn't mean you WILL do it. Who knows what will happen? A twisted ankle, sudden gastro-intestinal revolt, earthquakes, firestorms, a plague of locusts. Then, there comes a point when you realize that even in the worst case, you WILL finish. It's within reach --- so much so, that if you had to, you could crawl it in to the finish. Chris had just reached that point.

I found myself holding back tears. It wasn't the first time of the day, and it wouldn't be the last. After so much work and planning and so many hours of racing, after nearly not making it to the starting line because of the INS, it was finally going to happen. Our group of runners had grown to be five strong by this point: Chris, and four friends. Each time someone new joined us, Chris had to explain The Rule. The Rule was that if Chris was running, even though someone might be able to keep up doing a fast walk, everyone had to at least pretend to run. Everyone obeyed The Rule.

At the end of the final lap, Chris still had .4 mile remaining. The race director, Don Mann, takes each competitor out for the final fraction of a mile. The rest of us stayed at the finish line, allowing Chris to have a moment to herself on the course she had come to know so well. Watching her come down the final bit of road, I could hardly believe that it was about to happen. Only a moment later, she crossed the finish line, having finished something that she had started long, long before someone yelled, "GO!" 33 and a half hours earlier.

Chapter 6

After a round of hugs, Chris wandered over to a cot to rest for a while. The doctor asked how she was feeling. She was feeling good, but she wanted an IV. After a few questions, the doctor determined that she didn't need one. When I left her there, she was debating this point with him, but he was pretty adamant in his position that she wasn't in bad enough shape to warrant it. In the end, I guess she was just too tired to really push the point, because she never got the IV.

I was ready for a nap, or at least a seat, but the tent was a mess, we still had to organize all of our gear, the post race dinner would happen in several hours, and Chris and I both had to be at work the next morning. On the last lap of the run, a supporter of another competitor said to me, "You know, with all the running, and biking, and everything you've been doing, you've done pretty much the equivalent of an Ironman yourself." I think there was more than a little truth to that. I had run and walked 44 miles with Chris, rollerbladed six miles, ridden 58 miles, and when I was not with Chris, I was in almost constant motion. I didn't work at the same intensity that I would during an Ironman, but I certainly expended as much energy (probably more) than I do during a race. And much to my surprise, I realized that the satisfaction I was feeling was greater than I had felt after any of my own races. Now, though, I had a camp site to clean up, and a car to load. Tired as I may have been, seeing what I had seen over the weekend, I could hardly entertain any thoughts that my job was difficult.

I'm grateful that Chris brought me into this amazing event, and that she trusted me enough to give me so much responsibility. However, after all was done, after we had arrived back home, and we were ready to part ways, I admitted to her that I had a fear that things might change. After all, over the past year, innumerable conversations between us had started with the words, "So, in The Double, I think we should do this..." Without that, what would we talk about?

"Yeah," she said, "I see your point." And we both shrugged, knowing that there was nothing we could do about the inevitable passing of time and events.

The next day, I got a call at work. It was Chris. She was excited about something. "Aaron, remember how yesterday you said we might not have anything to talk about anymore? Well, I figured it out!"

"Huh, what did you figure out?"

"What we'll talk about! So, remember in The Double, when we did this..."

We talked and laughed and grew nostalgic for something that was only two days in our past. Everything was normal once again.

For more information on the Double IRON or Triple IRON Triathlon – please visit www.USAUltraTri.com, email Steve Kirby at steve@USAUltraTri.com or call (757) 430-8021.