

Race Result

Racer: Aaron Schwartzbard
Race: Odyssey Double Iron Triathlon
Date: Saturday, October 11, 2003
Location: Lake Anna State Park, Spotsylvania, VA
Race Type: Triathlon - Double IRON
Time: 28:36:00
Overall Place: 2 / 17
Comment: 2:38 / 0:07 / 15:27 / 0:06 / 10:18 - 2nd finisher of 17 starters, 12 finishers

Race Report:

I blame Chris. If she hadn't recruited me for whatever ridiculous training adventure she could design, if she hadn't been a willing accomplice in whatever ridiculous training adventure I could design, if she hadn't asked me to be her support crew last year, if she didn't spend all that time discussing her race plan with me, if she hadn't gotten me there to see the event for myself, I probably never would have given a second thought to racing a Double IRON. But she did all of that, and I did give it a second thought. Clearly, it's all Chris' fault.

With less than five minutes to the start of the race, the athletes --- numbering 17, including myself --- walked down the beach toward the starting point in the water. Was I ready? That was the question I had come to answer. I thought so. My swimming was good. Due to an injury, I had spent far more of my summer in a pool than I normally do. Due to that same injury, I hadn't been on my bike as much as I would have liked. In the month and a half before the race, I had gotten through some long rides. A Double Century earlier in the year and the riding I had done in the weeks leading up to the race gave me the confidence I'd need to make it through the bike ride, but I knew that it wouldn't be as strong as my swim or my run. Which brings me to my run. That would be the big question. The same injury that kept me off my bike stopped me from running. However, thanks to deep base and some so-called natural ability, I was running well leading up to the race.

During the week of the race, I spent a bit of time considering goals. Was I

there to prove to myself that I could complete the distance, or was I there to race the distance? Should I play it safe at all time, or could I take appropriate, measured risks? Was the thought that I might be competitive in this event confidence or arrogance? Although I've never participated in an event of this distance before, I've taken enough steps up in distance to understand what this next step might do to me. I decided that I was there to compete, not just to complete.

My only significant concern was a bruised rib. I had taken flight down a hill while trail running 10 days before the race. For a few days, I was worried about "trail rash" on one of my arms. It was only after several days --- early in the week of the Double IRON --- that one of my ribs started to give me problems. It was painful to turn over in my sleep, I felt like I had a side stitch when I tried to run, I couldn't take a deep breath, and a short swim four days before the race was excruciating.

The last 10 seconds were counted aloud from the beach as we 17 athletes -- - representing five countries and seven US states --- stood by the orange flag on the swim course that marked the starting point. With a shouted, "GO," the race was on. I stayed relaxed, focusing on pace and stroke. After a minute, I reached one end of the swim course, marked by a metal pylon in the water. I turned 180 degrees around it, and started to swim toward another metal pylon about 100 meters away. In two more minutes, I was there, so I turned around again. For several hours and 39 laps, I made my way back and forth along this course. Every fifth lap, Chris, who had agreed to be my support crew during the race, had waded out to one end of the course. She held her arms above the water, which was almost up to her armpits where she stood, offering a bottle of sports drink. I'd take a few sips, then start another five laps, shouting my race number at the end of each lap so the timers on shore would know I had moved a bit closer to the finish.

At the beginning of each set of laps, I had to focus on pace. I knew that I could swim 4.8 miles if I swam slowly. I also knew that I could push myself so hard that eventually, my arms would just stop pulling me through the water. I wanted to be swimming in that sweet spot where I could push myself and finish strong. While going around the pylons at the end of each lap, I refined my turn. Rather than trying to swim 180 degrees around the pylon (as some people were doing) or grabbing the pylon and turning around it (as other were doing), I swam an arc around each pylon, then, once clear of the metal, I'd roll onto my back to further the turn, take a stroke, then continue rolling until I was chest down once again. By the end of my roll, only slight adjustments were necessary to point me in the right direction. Voila! It's Aaron's super patented open-water flip-turn!

Somewhere in the middle of the swim, Chris said, "You lap times are very consistent." Good. Exactly the right thing to say. As far as things you want to hear, that's up there with, "My, that wetsuit makes you look very muscular," and, "No one else has come up with anything NEARLY as clever as your super patented open-water flip-turn!" Speed fades, but consistency is forever. So I continued consistently onward, lap after lap, until I had finished my last lap, and would head toward the beach.

The transition was leisurely. Chris and Jen (Chris' roommate who was acting as my official support crew's official support crew), walked with me to my bike. I asked, "How many people are out of the water?"

"You're the third." The guy ahead of me was in transition when we arrived at my bike. He came out of the water as I was starting my last lap, so he was only a few minutes ahead.

The race time was somewhere around 2:40, which was much longer than it should have taken to swim that distance. For some reason, all swim times seemed to be long by around 20 minutes. But everyone faced the same "penalty," so I was not concerned. It was time to ride. As soon as I was out of my wetsuit, I realized that the air was still quite chilly. I'd need more clothes than I had in the transition area. I told Chris to look in the box with my warm clothes, and to pull out my cycling vest and arm warmers. I'd pick them up after the first lap, when I passed by our "base camp." As I was about to mount my bike, I realized that the clothes I was wearing before the start of the race were sitting next to my bike. Ahh, I could wear my fleece pull-over for the first lap to avoid freezing! I put it on, and started my ride.

Two miles down the road, I reached the first turn around. This would be the short lap --- two miles out, two miles back. After finishing the lap, I was near the lake again, passing through the tent city that all the support crews had established. As I passed Chris, standing by my tent, I told her that the fleece was working well, and that I wouldn't need the arm warmers and vest after all. Four miles down, 220 to go. I would spend the rest of the day, and a bit of the night chipping away at those 220 miles, riding two and a half miles along the road leading out of the park, and two and a half miles back, 44 times. At the end of each lap, while passing Chris on the way to the turn-around, I'd shout out what I'd need. "Hammer Gel!" "Cytomax!" "Water!" "Nothing!" Then I'd turn around, and on my way out, she'd be standing on the side of the road, offering whatever I had requested.

After my 10th lap, I took my first stop, motivated primarily by the needs of my bladder. I took the opportunity to change out of my fleece, and into my

cycling vest and arm warmers. I consumed a few calories, and started riding again. The next stop was after 18 laps, again, to obey my bladder. The weather was cool, and I had been drinking quite a bit. Since I wasn't sweating much, all that fluid had to go somewhere.

I found myself at the slower end of the field in terms of speed. However, I noticed that some people were passing me far more frequently than they would if they were lapping me. I started paying more attention to the camps of other support crews. I noticed other racers eating, sitting, stretching. For what I lacked in speed, I compensated with consistency. I stopped only when absolutely necessary. I stopped after my 26th lap to put a light on my bike, then again, after my 41st lap to replace the light with a fully charged light.

Between those stops, I road steadily. The sun set, and the other cyclists disappeared into the night. I could see the small bit of road illuminated by my light, and I could see the yellow or white headlights of other cyclists as they approached me, or the red, blinking rear lights as they road away. Once the sun set, the easy part of the race was over. For a full night, I would be in motion with nothing to distract me. When the sun would rise again, I'd be moving more slowly, in more pain. In the dark, I had to continue to do the things I had done when it was light. I had to remember to eat just after the turn around at the far end of the course to stay on schedule with calories. I had to get out of my aerobars on the inclines at each end of the course to stretch my neck and upper back. Before reaching Chris, I had to take inventory of what I had, and what I would need for the next lap so that I could let her know what to do. I had to remember that coming down the road, I appeared to be a point of light, just like every other rider, so I had to make it clear as I was passing Chris that I was me. I had to avoid drifting off into my own mind, dazed and tired.

After my 41st lap, having replaced my light, I felt like I was in the final stretch. Only four more laps, 20 more miles. At the beginning of the ride, when I was fresh, the laps were short. Sometime in the middle, the laps started to feel longer and longer. Toward the end, the laps became short again. Each one of those four laps felt shorter than any that had come before. My times were consistent. Aside from a slowdown of about three minutes when it got dark, my lap times varied only by about a minute. And of course, the distance didn't change. Aside from the first lap, every lap was a five mile round trip. It was all in my mind. When the distance seemed larger than I, my mind was playing tricks on me. Or perhaps my mind was playing tricks when I felt in control. Either way, I reached the turn around at the far end of the course, and announced "I have some terrible news!"

The same group of volunteers had been at the end of the course all day. Each time I passed, I announced my number so they could record another lap for me. "What is it?"

I said, "This is the last time number 26 will be passing by this way!"

"Great job, Aaron!" I started the final two and a half miles and I was ready to be off my bike. My legs were feeling good, or at least as good as I would have hoped they could after 224 miles. I had been eating well. In fact, somewhere between 120 and 130 miles into the ride, I realized that I was consuming slightly more calories than I could absorb, so I had to cut back a little. My only significant concern about the bike ride had been my neck and upper back, but even those areas were feeling good. I wanted to pick up the pace and get to the end of the ride as fast as I could, but I had decided that I'd just enjoy the last miles of the ride, and use them to start preparing myself mentally for the run.

The time was 1:10 AM when I finished the ride. According to my bike computer, I had been riding for 15 hours and 10 minutes. My bike split was 15:27. Even though most people rode much faster than I did, by stopping for a total of 17 minutes over the entire ride, I got off the bike in sixth place. Chris had organized a transition area for me by all of my gear. Jen was standing by to help, as was Andy, who had arrived earlier in the afternoon. The transition was smooth; I changed my shoes, and had a small fruit cup to eat. The plan was to start off walking. The first portion of the run was the point-four. That is, of the 52.4 miles I'd have to cover on foot, the point-four comes first. I walked over to the run start to check in with the timers. "Number 26, starting the run." Andy came along as I started the final portion of the race. I wanted to use the point-four to allow myself to adapt to being off the bike, so Andy and I walked out to the turn-around point, then back to the beginning.

With that out of the way, I had 52 miles remaining in the race. The run course was along one mile of road --- out and back 26 times. I started running. During the swim, I knew I could start out steady, and push the pace toward the end. On the bike, my strength was consistency, and I would use that strength by keeping my stops to a bare minimum. But the run, for me, is where the real race begins. The run is where I have the most to gain, so that's where I'll take the biggest risks. My first lap was fast, about fifteen minutes for two miles. Andy came along for the first lap. I wasn't sure exactly how the run would play out, but based on past experience, I mentioned to Andy that I might get a little faster before dropping back. On the second lap, Andy stayed back at our base camp, and I found that I was starting to get a little slower.

Through the next few laps, I tried to find my pace. At the far end of the course, I'd have a few sips of sports drink from a bottle Chris had placed there for me. At the near end of the course, I'd try to have something a little more substantial. Most laps, that ended up being a small, salted, boiled potato. I had been sucking down gels and cookies and sweet drinks for 20 hours. I could still stomach the sweet stuff, but the potatoes were far more appealing. I'd finish a lap, and on my way out to start the next lap, I'd stop by base camp to grab a potato and a few sips of water.

For a while, I just settled into that pattern, clicking off laps. My bruised rib was bothering me, but only at the turn-arounds. While running, it was a dull ache. When turning, or reaching to grab a bottle, or taking a drink, my entire side would convulse briefly, as if it were about to seize up. Fortunately, the pain never got worse.

I hoped to make it through 10 laps before starting to add walking into the mix. After seven laps, I realized that I wasn't going to make it to 10. I started not to feel right. I was becoming light headed. On the eighth lap, I chose a section of the course on a slight incline, and walked for about 50 meters. I ran the rest of the lap. When starting my ninth lap, I knew things were still bad. I told Chris that I was going to take much longer on this lap, since I needed to walk quite a bit. My legs were still feeling fine, but if I didn't resolve whatever was causing my lightheadedness, the remaining thirty-some miles would be far more slow and painful than necessary.

Chris accompanied me. Within 100 meters, I was tripping over my feet, and I was having trouble walking in a straight line. A short while later, I asked Chris, "What do you think about me taking a short nap when we finish this lap?"

"Hmm," she thought, "There's a bit of light and activity back at the turn-around. How about at the end of the lap, we grab a sleeping bag, and bring it out here where it's dark and quiet?"

It was 4:00 am, I was tired and lightheaded. I wouldn't be able to run until I resolved my problems, so that meant that I'd have to stumble through another two miles before I'd get to lie down. "I don't think I could make it that far."

"Well, why don't you just sleep now?"

I thought about it. It sounded good. I needed to be horizontal for a couple minutes. "Okay."

"What do you need? Ten minutes?"

"No, five should do."

"Okay, you have five minutes."

I shined my light on a patch of grass by the side of the road, then bent down to take my spot. As soon as my head hit the ground, Chris was waking me. "Okay, nap time is over."

"Are you sure?"

"Yup, you seemed so comfortable, I even gave you an extra minute. You were making some weird grumbling noises."

I might have had a hard time believing that I had really slept for six minutes had it not been for one thing: as soon as we started moving again, I was walking in a straight line, and the lightheadedness was gone. I was inclined to take off running again, but I decided that I would walk the rest of the lap just to be certain that I was feeling good. At the end of the lap, I grabbed something to eat, and started moving again. I was running, but this time, I was in my "climbing gear." That is, I was moving at the slow, steady pace that I should be able to maintain through any condition or terrain. This was where my REAL run began. I was moving at a comfortable, easy pace, walking a short stretch of incline during each lap, calling out my number at each end of the course so the timers could record that I covered a bit more distance, eating a bit at the end of each lap.

I finished the first marathon before the sky became light. As the sun rose, athletes, support crews and volunteers emerged from the shadows. My legs were growing fatigued and my mouth felt like a swamp. More significantly, my entire body was ready to be done. Every muscle in my chest and back was sore. The light of day gave my spirits a boost, but my thoughts were still mostly about how much I had done, and how much more I had to do. "This is my 15th lap. When I get to the turn around, I'll have done 29 miles. When I finish I'll have done 30 miles. Next, I'll be on my 16th lap. That means I'll have 11 more laps. In two more laps, I'll only have nine laps left. That'll be my 18th lap. When I have nine laps left, I'm going to start counting down, rather than counting up. But I have to do two more laps after this one before I get there."

I hadn't thought about my position through most of the run. I only knew that I was working as hard as I could. I knew that I was running faster than

most, but through the night, the competitors are indistinguishable points of light, bouncing down the road. It wasn't until I had covered a little more than 30 miles that one of the volunteers told me that I was in third place. "You're only about five minutes behind second!"

Certainly, I could make up five minutes over the remaining 20 miles on anyone out there. Andy joined me for the next lap. I had been planning on taking an "easy" lap, but as I told Andy, "I'm on the hunt." By the end of the lap, I was in second place. During the next few laps, I worked to keep my pace up. I continued to walk portions of the course --- portions that seemed to become steeper and steeper with each lap --- but only as much as I thought necessary to run my best through the remainder of the lap. My plan was to put a significant gap between myself and the person behind me, and to keep an eye on the guy in front of me to see if I had any chance of catching him.

Although I was able to build a nice cushion behind me, I found that I wasn't getting any closer to the guy in front of me. He was two laps ahead of me, and that was just too much ground to make up in the remaining miles. No, I would just try to stay where I was. The air was warming up, and I was counting down through my final few laps. Each lap seemed longer than the previous one. If I hadn't already covered so many miles, the last five laps would have seemed like an insurmountable obstacle. But I thought back to the first few laps of the bike, and considered the way I had chipped away at the distance until I was done with that. I thought about the first few laps of the run, and how it seemed that the end of the first marathon was so far away. With only a few more miles to run, I had no choice other than to continue moving. I was suffering deeply, but I could finish.

I had one last special request for Chris. "Could you find my phone in my car, and call my parents? They're planning on coming down for the finish, and they'll probably be leaving home soon. Ask them to try to pick up a toothbrush along the way." My mouth felt disgusting, and almost as much as I wanted to be done, I wanted to get rid of the remains of all the junk on my teeth.

As the end drew near, Chris ran some laps with me. The roles from the previous year were reversed. Last year, as her support crew, I accompanied Chris, trying to keep her spirits up during the most difficult portions of the race. This year, she was the support, and it was my spirits that needed lifting.

We spotted my parents arriving as I was heading out on my 24th lap. A short while later, we came upon the guy in first place. He was finishing his

26th, and final, lap. We stopped to shake hands and to offer each other congratulation. My mother joined us for the 25th lap, and I introduced her to the volunteers at the far turn around point. Finally, I was ready to begin my 26th lap, my "victory lap." I reached the turn-around to begin the lap, and I started my final two mile segment. As I started running, something struck me as odd. Through all day and night, I had been passing this point, joking with the volunteers as I ticked off lap after lap. It seemed odd that I would start my final lap, and none of them would mention it. I turned back over my shoulder, "This is my last lap, right?"

"Uhh... No, you have TWO more."

I thought he was kidding, but when he didn't start to laugh after a few seconds, I knew that he was serious. But I had been keeping track of laps in my head, and Chris had been keeping track on paper. I was sure that I was on my 26th lap. I ran half way up to Chris. "Chris, could you come here, and bring the clipboard!"

She told me to start running, so I started the lap, not sure whether I had two miles, or four, remaining. Chris and the volunteers compared notes for several minutes until it became clear where the mistake was. Andy caught up to me on a mountain bike. "Well..." he said. He paused for a moment, clearly wanting to play with me, but at the same time, realizing that after 28 hours of racing, I might not be terribly amused by a practical joke. "*sigh*" This is your last lap."

At the far turn-around, I thanked the volunteers who had sat through the night, offering encouragement and keeping track of my race. I took one last sip from my bottle at that end of the course, and I started my final mile.

One of the things that drew me to racing so many years ago was the finish line. Whether a race goes well, or a race goes poorly, there's always that tangible divide between "incomplete" and "complete." In everyday life, we rarely get the closure that allows us to say that some given task or event is behind us. Deadlines slip, extra credit is available, we can go back and make a few touch-ups to the pictures. But when you race, no matter how many weeks or months or years you've spent preparing, after you cross the finish line, it's over. While that might sound frightening (and to some people, that sort of finality IS frightening), to those of us who love to race, it is a blessing. Cross that line, all of the work is done. Whether the day was glorious or disastrous, you have fulfilled an obligation to yourself, and there is nothing left to do, but enjoy the sense of accomplishment.

Twenty eight hours and thirty six minutes after I started, I finished this race.

If, at that moment, someone had asked me to articulate why I worked so hard to get to that finish line when I could have been spent the weekend sipping hot cocoa and eating bon-bons, I wouldn't have been able to do so. I really couldn't articulate much of anything after finishing. After a round of hugs, I just made my way over to a cot to lie down for a few minutes, semi-consciously listening to the conversations around me. After a half hour, I made my way to the showers to splash a bit of water on my body (the water was far too cold for me to actually get into the shower), and to change out of my race clothes. I joined my parents at a picnic table near the lake, and ate some bread and cheese, still half dazed. I went back toward the finish line to find Chris, Andy and Jen napping, so I decided that I'd join them. I spent the rest of the afternoon near the finish line, lying on a sleeping bag, working up a bit of energy to cheer for each finisher crossing the line.

On the Friday before the race, I remember telling myself, "Monday morning, I will either be a Double IRON finisher, or I won't be." Whatever I would encounter during the weekend, as long as I could make it to the finish line, I would have accomplished something that would bring me pride for the rest of my life. With that thought in mind, the pain I experienced during the race, as deep as it was, was never so deep that I would have considered stopping short of my goal. While I know how hard I worked to finish the race, I also recognize that I couldn't have done it alone. First and foremost, Chris not only did an outstanding job as my support crew, but she also introduced me to the event, and showed me how to do it last year when I supported her. Andy and Jen gave up their weekends to offer whatever support they could as I traveled back and forth along a small stretch of road. Gary showed up on Saturday, and my parents showed up on Sunday, giving encouragement through the event. The staff and volunteers of Odyssey were always cheerful despite working monstrously long shifts. Finally, my employer, ActivTrax, has been amazingly supportive of my training and racing, whether by allowing me to work odd hours, sneak out in the middle of the day for a run, or take some extra time off to travel to a race. Without all the support from people around me, there is no way I would have been able to start, much less finish, this race. In fact, I consider all that support to be such a special thing that one of these days, in the far distant future, after I've forgotten about all the pain, I might even consider doing another one.

Then again, maybe not. After all 281.2 miles is a heck of a long way to go.

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.