

The Triple IRON Report

October 7th-9th, 2005

Lake Anna State Park, Virginia

7.2 mile swim, 336 mile bike, 78.6 mile run

“Back and Forth, Back and Forth”

Every person who I have talked to has asked me the same question - why would you want to do a race such as the Triple IRON Triathlon? My answer is simple in concept, but difficult to understand for many.

I do triathlons for the accomplishment. Going further, testing my boundaries and limitations are what drive me. How do you really explain this passion? Can you truly explain to someone why you are driven? In athletics, being fast is not the only definition of accomplishment. Results can be measured in many ways. Overcoming self-doubt, facing adversity and conquering it, and most importantly, finishing something that in the back of your mind may seem completely unattainable. My proudest athletic moment before attempting the Triple IRON Triathlon, was finishing the Ultraman. No, it was not fast, but I persevered. I set out with a goal in mind and did it. I finished 7th in the world. I know only 17 started, but millions would not even attempt it. My desire to participate in such events is about the experience, not how I finish. Most do not understand this. People ask me if I have a good reason to do something to “just finish.” Finishing something for no other reason than the raw sense of accomplishment is a great thing. 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. 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, and 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.

To have a goal like a Triple IRON Triathlon inspires me. It forces me to look deeper into my soul and ask *why* and *how*. These questions really cannot be answered, but striving to figure them out is really the ultimate goal in life. If we knew all the answers, what point is there? For me, participating in life events that force me to ask these questions, makes me a more complete person.

The Beginning

The journey began many months ago. As many of us triathletes do, we spend hours on the computer mulling over different races, analyzing courses, and reviewing the best places to show our talents. One day in my searching, I discovered an event called the Deca IRON Triathlon. I became intrigued by what goes into such an extraordinary event. I read a race report by a crewmember describing her experience in the 2000 Deca in Monterey, Mexico.

The passion in which she wrote inspired me. For many days, I fantasized about attempting such a feat (24 mile swim, 1120 mile bike, and a 262 miles run). After realizing that the time and sacrifice would be too much, I decided to look elsewhere for my next challenge. This is when I came across the Triple (7.2 mile swim, 336 mile bike, and a 78.6 mile run). This is it I told myself. This is what I want to do. And so the journey began.

My life would change from this day forward. That night I sat down with my wife, Terry, and explained to her that I would like to attempt this race. Her response was exactly as I expected. The look on her face said it all. "Not again." I tried to explain to her what, why, and how. Being the loving and supportive wife that she is, she agreed to support me in my pursuit of this far-reaching goal. My next talk was with Chris Hauth, my coach and great friend. He explained to me that this was going to be unlike anything I could imagine both physically and mentally, but he was behind me as well.

Training

My training began with a slow build-up to regular Ironman training. Once a base was established we began a 4-week rotation in which every fourth week became an ultra distance week, with bike miles in the 450-500 mile range, run miles in the 80-120 mile range and swims in the 30,000 yard range. I spent many hours of the early mornings training. Waking at 3am and pushing out with my bike equipped with night riding gear I would circumnavigate the San Francisco Bay, beginning in Lafayette, riding down to San Jose, across to Half Moon Bay, and finally up to San Francisco and back home again. I began to enjoy the peaceful serenity of night riding. No cars, no other cyclists, nothing but time to think. I learned a lot about what it was going to take to ride through the night at the Triple, and I strongly believe that this practice aided in my success. Many weekends Greg Larson and I would travel to Lake Berryessa to do open water swims, Greg paddling next to me while I would do loops of the two-mile Lake Berryessa course. There were weeks where I would do three marathons in training. All this to try and prepare for something I knew little about.

October 4th, 2005

Dixie Hauth and Alex Fagan met me at the Oakland Airport to begin our trek to Lake Anna State Park, Virginia. Greg Larson and his daughter Alena were to meet us at the lake on Thursday. These three great friends were to be my life support for the days that lay ahead. We arrived at the Baltimore-Washington airport in the late afternoon. Our plan was to travel to Annapolis, Maryland where Dixie's sister Wesley and her son Hurst live. After a short visit, Alex and I left Dixie with her sister and nephew, and the two of us proceeded to a nearby hotel. Over dinner in our hotel room, Alex and I discussed race strategy. We talked about nutrition, pace, sleep and weather. We had checked the weather report prior to leaving, and it looked like we were going to get some rain during the bike. I started questioning my equipment. Did I have enough clothes? Should I wear rain pants? Did I have the correct bike lube? How was I going to see without my glasses? I began to panic at what lay ahead. At that point, we stopped talking about the race and proceeded to

go to sleep. Unfortunately my mind would have none of that - I tossed and turned all night.

October 5th, 2005

After a rough night of not sleeping, we awoke and checked out of the hotel. We then picked up Dixie at her sisters and headed to Leesburg, Virginia to pick up our home for the next four days. Many months ago I had decided that I would rent an RV to use as our base camp for the race. All the other athletes and crews were going to use tents. To me this sounded ridiculous and not comfortable at all. We arrived at the home of a family that rents out their personal RV. The RV was one of the nicest I had ever seen. It was 38 feet long, three full size beds, full size refrigerator, washer and dryer, shower and much more. The concept behind spending the extra money to rent such an RV was to make it as comfortable for my support crew as possible. Not only was this going to be a difficult task for me, but an extremely difficult one for them. I was hoping this might make it a bit easier for all of them.

After reviewing the ins and outs of the RV, we set out for our next destination - Dixie's parent's house in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our plan was to stay the night and then proceed to the lake the following morning. Upon arriving in Charlottesville, we made a stop at the local supermarket to load up on food and supplies for the race. Unlike most races, my nutritional intake would be much different. I planned to eat regular food as much as possible. I had estimated that I would burn approximately 40,000 calories during the race, therefore solid foods would be my best bet. At the supermarket we met Dixie's dad - Bob, or "Big Daddy". He helped us with the shopping and asked if we would like to take a spin with him after we put out bikes together. Sounded like a great idea.

Upon arriving at the home of Dixie's parents, we proceeded to put together our bikes for our tour of the area with her dad. We rode to the local Country Club and to the University and back to the house. We showered and sat down to an incredible dinner of BBQ ribs with all the fixings. Dixie's family is one of the sweetest and most loving I have ever met. Their warmth and hospitality were exactly what I needed to calm my nerves, and I was very grateful for a good night's sleep that night to make up for my restless night before. It is not often that you cross paths with such wonderful people - I will always cherish the time we spent with them and look forward to the next time we are together.

October 6th, 2005

One day before the race. We left Dixie's home and headed for the lake. The drive was about an hour and a half. Turning into Lake Anna State Park, I now realized there was no turning back. Driving down the well-paved road, I recognized the scenery from the photos on the race website. This would be the course on which I would travel the many miles ahead. As I took it all in, I laughed to myself knowing that what lay ahead was for me to conquer. A peace that I had never felt before flowed through my body. What a strange feeling. Shouldn't I feel nervous I thought? As we approached the lake, Alex and Dixie

moved to the front of the RV to get a glimpse of the lake. There it was – Lake Anna. We drove to the bottom of the road and stopped. What do we do now?

At a small beach shack a man appeared and waved to us. We drove over to him and parked the RV. We introduced ourselves and found out he was the race director, Steve Kirby. We asked him where the transition was and where would be the best place to set up? He explained to us that we would have to park in the lower parking area because the park rangers would not allow us to park on the side of the road. After some discussion between Alex and Dixie and I, we decided to look for another area to set up our base camp. Eventually we found an area ideal for what we needed directly located near the bike and run course. As we started to set up camp, the rain began to fall. We all laughed a bit and said it would pass. Ten minutes later the rain was coming down like I had never seen it before. We soon found out that tropical storm Tammy had made its way to us, and we should expect much more of this throughout the coming weekend.

Night rolled around and Dixie made dinner for everyone. We made final preparations for the next morning and hit the sack. I lay awake hour after hour. Anxiety had gotten the better of me and I could not fall asleep. Had I trained enough? Could I mentally push through the low points? Did I have the right food? Was my pregnant wife doing ok at home? How was I going to do? At 2am I woke Dixie with tears in my eyes. I explained to her that I was scared. Her calming voice and her words of encouragement were music to my ears. I was able to drift off for a few hours. Then at 5am three alarms went off within thirty seconds of each other. My crew scrambled out of bed and began race morning preparation. Greg made oatmeal, Alex prepared my bike and I nervously paced the RV trying not to let my crew see the tears in my eyes. I was finally at the point I had been preparing for. It was about to begin. After struggling to put a sufficient meal in my belly, we packed the car. Wouldn't you know it, it was raining. Not hard but raining nonetheless. Arriving at the swim start, we had fifteen minutes until the horn was to sound. We set up my bike, reviewed the swim strategy, and headed for the beach. A hug from my crew and a special kiss from Alena, and I entered the water. The energy in the air was sort of a controlled panic. I was the only rookie in the bunch. I had no idea what was to come. My competitors were seasoned ultra athletes who have all done at least one other Triple, and a few as many as fifteen. I thought to myself "these people are nuts."

As the horn sounded, I pushed off the lake bottom and began a nice steady stroke. The swim is done in a clockwise loop consisting of 330 yards. We would do 36 loops or 11,880 yards – the equivalent of three Ironman swims (7.2 miles). As I finished the first lap, I realized that I was in the lead. Was I going too fast? Are these people slow? I kept the pace and finished the first 12 laps, or first Iron swim, in just under 58 minutes. At this point I stopped for a quick drink and a Gu and was back on my way. Mid way through the second Iron swim, I looked over and saw a familiar face swimming with me. Greg had gotten into the water and was swimming alongside of me with the permission of the race director. We swam together for the rest of the race, and I finished in just under three

hours. I exited the water in first place, glad to be done. The swim was not too difficult, but it was only the beginning.

The Bike

After a quick change into my bike clothes I was off onto the course. Oh, I forgot to mention that it was still raining, but now it was coming down in sheets. I set my bike computer to average pace and not real time pace. I did this so that I would not be concentrating on my speed at all times. I climbed the hill for the first time, relieved that I had just finished the swim. I checked it off in my mind and smiled, knowing that I had just completed my longest swim ever. The bike course consisted of a rolling, five-mile loop that I would do 67 times or 336 miles, the equivalent of three Iron Triathlon bike segments. As I rolled through my first loop, I took in the beautiful surroundings of Lake Anna. I began to clip off lap after lap with no problem. Because the rain had not stopped in hours, my body was soaked to the bone. I began to worry about what this might do to me later in the race. On my next loop I asked Alex for a tube of Vaseline. I placed this in my bike jersey and set a routine of applying it to my saddle region (if you know what I mean) every three to four laps. The process was simple – open the tube, squeeze a good amount into my shorts and squish it around. I hoped this would prevent chaffing. I kept telling myself how smart this was and wondered if anyone else was doing it. Lap after lap, seeing the same thing began to become monotonous. I had prepared a 50-song play list on my iPod to rock me through the monotony, but was afraid to put it on due to the fact that it was raining so hard and I did not have my glasses on. The last thing I needed was extra stimulation.

At about 5pm I finished the first 112 miles and was feeling pretty good. It was still raining, but my spirits were high. I stopped at our makeshift feed zone, high-fived everyone and set out to clip off some more laps. During the first 112 miles, both Greg and Alex periodically accompanied me on the bike. Their encouragement was great. They had not been cycling much and I knew that it would be tough on them, but not once did they complain about anything. At about 7:30pm – 29 laps in – I decided to make my first brief stop. Darkness had set in and I need to put on my lighting system. I pulled into the RV, removed my wet clothes, wrapped a towel around myself and sat down at the table in our warm RV. My first thought was of the other racers in their tents and their cold meals. I then turned my attention to the plate that was put in front of me. Dixie had made lasagna at her parent's house, and this was to be my meal tonight. Let me tell you, it was good. I sat and enjoyed my accomplishments so far, and thanked my crew for their incredible efforts. I told them that this is where the fun begins. The night would be a different animal.

Twenty-nine laps down, thirty-eight laps to go. Back on the course, the rain was still coming down. I turned on my lighting system and off I went. I soon realized that I had the best lighting system of all the other racers. Light-n-Motion has the best bike lights on the market. The beam was so bright that one racer got upset at me because he said it was

blinding him. I changed the angle a bit and smiled, knowing the \$500 I had spent on it was well worth it. As I approached the 200 mile mark around 12am, I started to feel a bit sleepy. And, as most know, I must get my sleep – without it I am a mess. I pushed it out of my mind and decided to enjoy the rain some more. I am not kidding when I say that it had not stopped raining since I started. At 208 miles I patted myself on the back. My longest ride to date was 207 miles. Another accomplishment I checked off in my mind. I did not let myself get too excited though as I was not here to ride 208 miles – I was here to finish the Triple IRON Triathlon.

On lap 43 (215 miles) the strangest thing began to happen. As the rain continued to come down, I began to notice frogs all over the road. Big frogs and small frogs. I am not talking about a few frogs, I am talking about thousands and thousands of frogs. I began to wonder if I was seeing things. It was now sometime around 2a.m. in the morning. As I was riding I caught up to another racer and asked him if he was seeing the frogs. Sure enough, he was. By 2:30am, my first signs of energy depletion became evident. I am describing this from what I have been told, as I do not remember any of this. I evidently became transparent in my actions and comments. My crew saw it and made the decision that it was time for me to get a little rest. Off to the RV we went. Wet clothes came off and my head hit the pillow that Dixie had placed for me on one of the three beds in the RV. Just as I began to drift off, Alex gave me a nudge and said it was time to get back on the road. Greg fetched the warm clothes out of the dryer. The bad news was, that after only five minutes back on the bike I was completely drenched again.

It is amazing the things you think about while riding through the rain for endless hours. I thought about my beautiful wife at home with our sweet little baby girl in her stomach. I thought about how lucky I am to be with such a wonderful person who loves and supports me. I dreamed about what our little girl was going to look like. I prayed that I was going to be a good father. I thanked God for my family, my friends and the opportunities that life has brought me. I reflected on my life accomplishments. And many times thought about how lucky I was just to be there even attempting such an event. Just being there in the moment was truly satisfying. I am the kind of person who generally rushes through things, gets them done and moves on to the next thing. Today, I was happy to be in the moment. This was a victory in my mind.

As I passed by our makeshift feed zone again I saw Alex, in full raingear, slumped over in a chair sound asleep. In the background, Dixie appeared out of the RV and began running through the rain with a pot of hot soup. Wow, I said to myself. These are great friends. On the next lap, Greg joined me again and continued with me until the finish. His conversation and support were a blessing. When all was said and done, Greg ended up riding almost 100 miles with me.

One lap prior to the finish, my crew gathered their cameras and drove down to the race transition to greet me. A truly glorious and monumental feeling swept over me. Again, I tried not to let my crew see me cry, but the emotions were overwhelming. I received hugs

from all. I had just ridden 336 miles in the pouring rain!!! It sure felt great to be off the bike. My butt was sore, my legs hurt and my back was cramping, but my spirits were higher than I can remember. It may have not looked like it, but I was spiritually high. It is amazing to think that after such a grueling 24 hours, you feel on top of the world. The longest day on the Tour de France is about 175 miles. My crew ushered me to the showers where I took a quick rinse and put on my running gear. As I finished getting ready, Dixie approached me and said that she had been waiting to tell me something for a while but had decided to wait. With a nervous smile on her face she proclaimed that I was currently in first place. Trying to keep everything in perspective, I nodded and tried not to think about it. My crew deciding to wait and tell me after completing the bike was the best thing they could have done. If I had known early on in the bike, I may have pushed too hard. What a crew. Two legs down, one to go.

The Run

I am by no means a good runner. I have learned to enjoy it, but it just something I am not very good at. I now had 78.6 miles in front of me. One mile out and one mile back – 39 times. I set out with a nice brisk walk. My plan was to walk back to the RV, have a little breakfast and continue my laps. At the RV, Alena was in the driver's seat of the RV watching a DVD. I am not sure who made me breakfast, but let me tell you it was great. I sat for a few minutes and was off again. Surprisingly, I felt pretty good and began to run. I alternated between fast walking and jogging for the next 14 miles. It was at this point that my body began to ache like it had never ached before. I began to get tired. The kind of tired where you can hardly hold your eyes open. Somewhere around 6pm, my feet began to swell and form monstrous blisters. I had no choice but to stop my run – I mean walk – and have a visit with the doctor. I removed my shoes to find a horrible sight. My feet had been wet now for some 35+ hours, and the sight of them would make most people faint. Calmly, the doctor removed a new knife from its package and began lancing the 25 or so blisters that had formed all over my feet. Once this was done, he decided the best thing to do was superglue duct tape to my feet to try and prevent more damage. The process took about fifteen minutes, and I was then on my way again. As I walked away I asked myself “Did that doctor just superglue duct tape to my feet? How will I ever get it off?” Slowly I proceed back up the hill from the run turnaround – I forgot to mention that the run course was uphill for a half mile and then downhill for a half mile.

Things started to become very fuzzy around 11pm. My body was not functioning properly. My mind was wandering and my eyes kept trying to shut. At this point I had slept a total of about 30 minutes since the race started. I began to have a very hard time taking in nutrition. During the past five hours or so I was using Red Bull – a high sugar, high caffeine drink – to keep me alert. The Red Bull was no longer working. As I drifted slowly into a bad place, I began to question my ability for the first time. On the next lap I sat down in a chair at our feed station. I do not remember any of this, but have been told the story by my crew. As I sat there, the new leader of the race stopped to get something from his crewmember. Both he and I seemed to drift off into never-never land at the same time.

He was standing at the time and almost fell over. At this point, Dixie decided to call her husband and my coach, Chris (who was in Hawaii preparing for the Hawaiian Ironman), to get his thoughts and advice. Once Dixie finished her call, I was brought immediately to the RV and told that I was going to take a rest. The next thing I remember were the alarms going off and my crew scrambling around. As I awoke, I asked how long I had slept. They all looked at each other, trying to determine who was going to tell me. I'm not sure who chimed in first, but someone said "three hours." I looked at them in disbelief. "How could you let me sleep that long?" I asked. Dixie replied that Chris has said this was for the best. So, I shut my mouth and began to get ready. Chris has been my coach for three years, and I respect immensely his opinions, techniques and coaching ability. Once I heard it was recommended by Chris that I sleep for three hours, I was ok with it. Chris is a great friend, coach and mentor. His ability to see the positive in every situation is incredible, and those who follow his ways find greatness in their achievements. He is an inspiring leader and has been an extremely important person throughout this journey.

Back on the road I felt a new sense of drive. It was now 3am and I began to fantasize about the end. This lasted one lap. My feet were on fire and my hands were swelling badly from the repetitive swinging motion. Dixie had joined me prior to my nap and was again with me. The laps clipped by slowly and eventually I had finished the second marathon. As the new day appeared, my pace slowed even more. I began walking like a chicken, trying to relieve the pressure on my blisters. The final marathon was a slow go. Dixie (who is four months pregnant) walked the entire third marathon with me. I think she ended up walking almost 35 miles total when all was said and done. Whenever I began to complain and look for sympathy, Dixie would just give me a pat on the back and force me to continue - for this I will always be grateful.

Dixie's family arrived, and as a group we walked the final three laps together. On the very last lap, I requested that I walk it alone. I wanted to reflect on the incredible journey that I had just taken. As I walked, I tried to remember all that I could about my experience. I think I cried for the entire last two miles. Rounding the last bend, I saw Greg, Alena, Alex, Dixie, and her family waiting for me with the American Flag. When I reached them, they handed me the flag and we all walked together across the finish line.

I felt relief, joy, pride, sadness, and most of all thankful. "I am a Triple IRON Triathlete" I told myself.

Out of the 11 athletes that began this journey, six dropped out and one finished after the cut-off time. I ended up in third place. The official from the International Ultra Triathlon Association wrote in his newsletter about the race "48 hours of rain and general typhoon-like weather made this one of the most memorable (if not most hellish) races I've ever covered. This was probably one of the toughest Double/Triple IRON triathlons in history."

Conclusion

No matter what, I will always be a Triple IRON Triathlete. I earned it and I can keep it forever. This experience has taught me a lot about myself, as well as reaffirmed many things. It is amazing that in just 50+ hours you can learn so much about yourself. I learned that without others in your life supporting what you are doing, your goals are infinitely harder. To accomplish anything great, you need to love and respect yourself. You need people by your side to help you go in the right direction. I learned that when bad times are in front of you, you must always know that at the other end things are going to be great. It may take a while to get there, but greatness will always come. Hard work always creates positive result. They may not be the results that you anticipated, but you will be rewarded. I realized that challenges are no more than a journey into bettering yourself. In my case, patience was my challenge and I conquered it. I learned that limitations are just boundaries to be broken. But most of all I learned that with the right attitude, greatness will prevail.

To my crew – Greg, Aleyna, Alex, and Dixie

Without them, I would not have achieved this goal. Your sacrifice was inspirational. Your friendship means the world to me. I will cherish it forever. I thank you not only for supporting me, but also for believing in me. I truly love all of you. I sit typing this report with a true understanding of friendship, accomplishment and pride. I am not ashamed to say that I am very proud of myself. I will carry this experience with me for the rest of my life.

My Wife

Without my wife, none of this would have been possible. Her willingness to support such a crazy goal made this so much easier for me. I love her with all my heart and thank her for being there for me. Even though she was not with me during the race she was in my mind the entire time. To be loved as I am is the greatest feeling in the world. She is the one that I can turn to when time are tough. She also has finished the Triple IRON Triathlon.

I am A Triple IRON Triathlete