

Virginia Double IRON ~ October 7-8, 2006
Lake Anna State Park, Virginia, USA

Race Report

Pre-Race

Wow, where to begin? About seven or eight years ago I got bit hard by the endurance bug. For several years my passion has been to see how far I can go, versus how fast I can go. This has led me to do several 24 hour Nordic ski races and five Ironman triathlons. I first learned of the Double Ironman about two years ago and I was shocked to learn that such an event existed. As it turns out there are many events much longer than an Ironman. Outside of the Double Iron there are Triples, Quintuples, and the grand-daddy of them all, the Deca IRON (10x Ironman). I was so intrigued to learn that events such as this existed. But was it possible for me to do a Double? After finishing Ironman Wisconsin 2004 a complete wreck I decided that I was not fit enough to do a Double and I may never have what it takes. Fast forward to June 2005; this is when I decided that I would indeed try the Double in October 2006. This was the best opportunity for me as I still had another year of training available to help me build up the mental and physical strength needed to complete the Double. As my good friend Mark Howard would tell me, Matt, you've been training for the Double your whole life. Basically, he means that each year of training builds on the previous year and so on you don't just train for one season to safely complete an event like this; it takes years of persistent training to complete it without being completely destroyed. Besides, I didn't want to do the Double and come out of it hating endurance sports. I simply wanted to see if I could find my physical and mental limits and, if not, at least push them out further.

In late March 2006 I started specifically training for the Double. Getting back in to the swim, bike, and run routine was pretty calming for me. However, I still don't like riding my bike outside when temperatures are in the 40s or colder! I was training very large bike miles while consistently training the swim and run. My first test was Ironman Lake Placid on July 23, 2006. This would be a good gauge of my fitness. Unfortunately, the final seven weeks before Placid I started to dig myself into a hole on the bike. I was trying to do the cycling volume necessary for success at the Double while still recovering enough for Placid. Unfortunately, this was a thin line that I could not balance. I went in to Placid very over-trained on the bike and suffered more during the bike leg than any other Ironman I had done. However, my running legs were quite fresh and I ended up setting a PR of 10:24. Not too bad considering how bad I felt on the bike.

Unfortunately, right around the time of Placid I developed a bacterial infection that completely knocked me out. I got in touch with my ultra-mentor Eileen Steil (eileensteil.com) and she calmed me down. I was completely destroyed in early August and was very close to bailing on the Double. My cycling legs were shot and I couldn't even do a 30 minute swim without great difficulty. Eileen forced me to take four days off completely (thanks Eileen!) which helped some. I went to the doctor and got started on some antibiotics. By late August I was feeling back to normal and, with coaching from Eileen, I set off to do my final five-week build period before the Double taper.

This build period was the most confidence-building five weeks of my life. My long workouts were going very well and, most importantly, I was looking forward to them! I was doing things that were impossible a year ago. This was a great feeling. Also, I started to use the popular Endurox recovery drink and I cannot believe how much of a difference this made in my training. Absolutely amazing! Try it if you haven't yet.

I entered my three-week taper tired but confident. Three weeks out from my race I did my last really long workout which was a 177 mile bike followed by about a 7 mile run and I absolutely nailed it. I was ready! I started to cut back on the length of my workouts but maintained my frequency and increased intensity a touch and this worked like a charm. I started to feel stronger as each day passed; actually, I was worried that I was peaking too soon! Two weeks out my good friend Marta from Minneapolis came up to Hayward to ride a Century with me. This was Marta's first 100 mile ride and she did awesome! We rode much harder than I had anticipated. I then slipped off for an hour run and felt strong. In the final two weeks I did no individual workout longer than 2 hours. It was time to rest and recover.

I left Wisconsin on Tuesday, October 3 for the two day drive to Virginia. After a night stay in Toledo, Ohio I arrived in Fredericksburg, VA on Wednesday afternoon. I slipped out to Lake Anna State Park (the race site) and did a short bike and run to loosen up after sitting in the car for two days. It was very quiet and peaceful; the sun was setting with a full moon on the opposite horizon - absolutely gorgeous. I was getting good vibes already.

I spent much time watching the Weather Channel and knew conditions were going to be rough. Temps in the low 50s and a lot of rain! I drove out to the park on Friday afternoon and saw the Triple IRON athletes already underway. Most people did not look happy. I guess it was hard to be happy considering it was 55 degrees and absolutely pouring. It was extremely humbling to watch the Triple athletes grinding it out on Friday and to know that when I go back to the hotel to sleep they will still be racing. And when I arrive at the park on Saturday morning (my race day) they would still be racing. The mental strength these folks have is off the charts. Very, very humbling.

Race Day

I arrived at the Park about 4:30 am to unload and organize my gear. At about 5:30 or so I met my crew member, Allen Harrison, for the first time. Allen is a great guy; he lives in the area with his wife and three children (all of whom came out to watch!) and is Vice President of Battlefield Homes in Fredericksburg. As it turns out, Allen's sister Molly came out later in the day to also help crew. So it turns out I would have two crew members with me all night long. Anyone who has done an ultra-endurance event knows how important having a supportive crew is; Allen and Molly were great the entire time despite the wind, cold, and rain. More on crew support later!

Swim

The temperature at race start was in the low 50s I think, and quite damp. I kept a few layers over my wetsuit while standing around as I didn't want to go in to the water chilled. As I finally got in to the water I was pleasantly surprised at how warm it was...hypothermia would not be an issue!

The swim course was a straight segment of approximately 528 feet in length. We would swim down to the end of the buoy line, turn around, and then swim 528 feet back to the start. We had to swim this out and back section 24 times for a total of 4.8 miles. The water was shallow so at the turnaround points I was able to stand up and spin myself around which was much quicker than trying to swim a 180 degree turn. The race started quietly and I immediately slipped in to my comfort zone; I wanted to keep this same pace the entire time. My longest swim to date was about 3 miles so I wasn't sure how my body would handle the extra 1.8 miles but, in reality, I wasn't too concerned. On the second loop I swam head-first in to a metal pipe that was used to mark the buoy line. This really hurt and upset me since I wasn't paying enough attention to swimming in a straight line. From this point on I made sure to sight often and swim as straight as possible. I checked my watch after one loop to get an idea of how long the loops were taking if I recall my loops were somewhere near 7 minutes.

After five or six loops I would holler to Allen (who was standing on the shore) to get ready to throw me a bottle of water, Gatorade, and/or some Gu as I came around on the next loop. This system worked well as Allen, for the most part, didn't need to get wet to give me nutrition; he simply threw my nutrition out to me in the water. I think I might have had 4-5 feeds or so from Allen during the swim. I had developed a very bad headache which I attribute to the tight swim cap we were required to wear. I thought it would go away after I got out of the water but it really stuck around until I started the run.

The race officials hollered to me that I had two laps left! I was very surprised as I felt really good for the most part. For the last 30-45 minutes my biceps got quite fatigued but, other than that, I had no problems except for the massive headache. My finish time was 2:34 which was the second best time of the day. The first place swimmer was a blazing 1:59!! I could have gone faster but, if given another chance, I would have kept the same pace. It's a long race and I knew that 15-20 minutes in the swim would not make a difference.

T1

The first transition was pretty uneventful. It was nice to get some cheers from the race officials and spectators as I got out of the water. Allen joined me at the shore and I ran in to the locker room where I had a bag set up with my cycling gear. I toweled off and changed in to warm gear. Then we both ran up the hill to my support tent where I had my bike, socks, cycling shoes, helmet, hat, and gloves. I started the ride with cycling shorts, knee warmers, thin socks, neoprene booties over my socks, Vaseline on my feet, a Craft long underwear top, cycling jersey, ski gloves, and arm warmers. In addition, I had a skullcap under my helmet and a fleece headband around my neck for a little extra warmth. It would never get out of the mid 50s for the entire bike and the roads were wet; plus I expected rain for much of the day and night. This wasn't a time to dress light; the key for me was to maintain as much body heat as possible without overheating.

Bike

Cycling has always been my strongest discipline so I was happy to get out on the road. The bike course consisted of an approximately 2.4 mile section out to the turnaround at the Park entrance, and then 2.4 miles back to the start. We had to ride this approximately 4.8+ mile loop 45 times for a total of 224 miles. There was a lot of repetition but, in races like this, I don't mind it. It's nice to be close to your support at all times; plus, it's much safer.

I set out on the first of many loops and I felt strong. All of the Triple IRON racers were still on the bike course and it was very intense to see these hardcore athletes still riding their bikes. I had just started my ride but the Triple IRON racers had been racing for about 27 hours already! This was very humbling to say the least. After one lap I checked my watch to get an idea of how long the loops were taking. This would be the last time I would check my watch until I got done with the bike leg.

The course was heavily wooded with nice pavement and lots of curves to keep it interesting. The first mile or so consisted of a gradual uphill and then we twisted our way to the turnaround. Actually, with the strong headwind (15-20 mph or so?) heading out, the first segment rode like it was a gradual uphill most of the way. At the turnaround we caught a nice tailwind and cruised back to the start (which is where my support crew was). Every few laps I'd let Allen and Molly know what I wanted to eat and drink. I tried to keep it fairly simple. My target was about 400 calories/hour on the bike. I never count calories but I'm guessing I was pretty close to that mark. I would drink Gatorade and water, have a Gu every now and then, a Clif Bar, turkey and cheese sandwich, peanut butter sandwich, pretzels, and Pringles. I was also supplementing with Thermolyte electrolyte tabs the entire race.

It didn't take long for the laps to blend together. My headache was getting worse and Allen would get me some ibuprofen every now and then; unfortunately, it didn't work that well. I would just have to deal with it. Soon after it started to rain and continued for much of the ride. Once the first wave of rain came I put on a pair of glove liners under my ski gloves. My entire body was soaked to the bone but I did what I needed to maintain body heat. My toes were getting pretty cold and I wiggled them every now and then to get the blood flowing. (Yes Harry, my toes!) At some point in the latter half of the bike leg Beat Knechtle of Switzerland, the winner of the Triple IRON (who, from what I understand, is one of the best in the world at this stuff, if not the best) started his run! It was amazing to see him smile and give a quick nod of appreciation to me. Its weird but I actually felt relief knowing that someone in the Triple had finally finished their bike leg; the weather was so bad for much of the race so, somehow, watching Beat get off the bike reinvigorated me.

Early in the race I told Allen that I didn't want to know where I stood in relation to my competitors and I didn't want to know how many laps I had left until there were only 10 to go. After a while it started to pour and I was getting very cold. I stopped briefly to put on my rain cape (I was soaking wet but the purpose of the cape was to keep in body heat). I kept thinking that I have to be getting somewhat close to the 10 laps to go point. But it never came. I just kept riding and riding with, seemingly, no end in sight. Darkness came and I stopped briefly to put on my headlight and battery. Allen, Molly, and myself had a good laugh when we couldn't find a knife to cut the zip-tie that held my headlight on to the bike. I suggested that the knife was next to Molly's gun. It sounds very silly now but it was pretty nice to have a good laugh at that point.

Here comes the high point of my bike: Allen asks if I like pizza and, of course, I tell him it's my favorite food. Molly had run off to Little Caesars and picked up four large pizzas for us to eat. That first piece was like heaven. It was so warm and salty; absolutely perfect. I think I ate an entire piece in the next 2.4 miles. Thanks Molly! After this, the rain picked up again and I threw

on a windbreaker. At this point I had six layers on my upper body and I was completely soaked but I was moderately warm. At some point Allen said I had nine laps left! I couldn't believe how good that sounded. I rode maybe three laps and I forgot how many I had left: did I have five to go or six? I was kind of bugged out trying to keep track of the laps I had left but I would let Allen and Molly do the counting; I would keep riding until they told me to stop. At some point after dark there were a few cars on the course using their headlights to shine on a rider that had crashed. I don't know who it was or if they were okay. We carried good speed in to each turnaround and, with the wet roads and greasy brakes, stopping was becoming a challenge. I think everyone needed extra caution as I heard someone had also crashed at the turnaround because they were carrying too much speed. Twice on the bike I had closed my eyes to rest a tiny bit and I actually rode off the pavement onto the shoulder. I still wonder if I had dozed off for a few seconds when this happened. Regardless, after hitting the shoulder I was paranoid about getting a flat tire. I never did get one.

Finally, I was out on my last lap. I was so, so happy to be done. I felt pretty good except my neck was killing me from riding in the aero bars the whole time. I still had the massive headache. My legs felt solid which was very good news! At no point did I feel like I was working hard on the bike. I just rode my race and tried to stay steady. All those 10 hour training rides were paying off! My bike split (including time needed to add clothes, put on lights, and grab food) was 13 hours and 33 minutes which was 73 minutes faster than the second best rider.

T2

Transition 2 was pretty uneventful. It felt so nice to change all my clothes. I finally checked my watch and saw that it was about midnight. It's weird how you lose perception of time after doing so many repetitive loops. I sat for a little while and had some tortellini soup (thanks Molly!), some pizza, and a few other things before I set out on the run.

Run

I've learned enough in Ironman to know that how fast you swim or bike is pretty much unimportant. The run is where huge chunks of time are either lost or gained. This race, truly, was all about the run. My longest run to date had been 28.2 miles so I wasn't sure how I'd handle 52.4 miles. All I could do is run and try my best. I knew that I would hit all time physical and mental lows on the run and, as expected, the race delivered on these.

The run course was an approximately one mile out and back segment which we completed 26 times. The first half mile of the run course was uphill (sharing the first half mile of the bike course). Then it cut off on a new road for a flat half-mile before turning around. At the turnaround point there were some race officials recording our race numbers to make sure we completed each full loop. Allen set off with me on the first loop. I felt surprisingly good. I've really worked on my run efficiency the last two years and I've made great improvements. I look silly when I run (Allen even commented on this!) but it's efficient and works for me. My first two mile loop took about 18 minutes or so I think. On this first loop I passed Beat and he had a few comments for me which actually ticked me off. I think it was just his competitive nature and my irritability that clashed for a moment. I set out on the second loop alone and tried to stay comfortable. It was cool but the rain had stopped. Allen gave me some glow sticks to attach to myself as the bike course and run course shared the road for a while and it was difficult to see the

runners in the dark. After a few loops Allen went up to the turnaround point and left a stash of water, 7-up, Gatorade, food, and Ros on the side of the road. With this setup, I would be no further than 1 mile from food.

I had planned to take No-Doz caffeine pills once the sleep deprivation started. I suppose I took the first two pills at approximately mile 20 or so. I got a little jolt but not too much. I really didn't want to start on the coke yet as I wasn't sure my stomach could handle it for 30+ miles. I continued to count off the loops as best as I could and took a break after the first marathon to change tops, and to put on dry shoes and socks. Amazingly, I had no problems with my feet - no blisters or anything. I use Vitruvian running shoes and I recommend that anyone at least give them a shot. I've tried lots of \$100+ running shoes and the Vitruvians are the only shoes that work for me and they only cost \$60! (vitruvianrunning.com)

After I started out again the sleep deprivation hit really hard. I would close my eyes for a few seconds while running in hopes of resting my eyes a bit. It really didn't help much but I kept doing it anyways. Muscle fatigue was getting pretty severe at this point. I asked Allen and Molly to get the coke ready. I started on the coke which helped a little but the sleepiness was overwhelming. I continued to take more No-Doz but they had little to no effect. I was at the point where the only thing that was going to keep me moving forward was my mental strength and moral support from Allen and Molly. At 30 miles or so I had a hard time dealing with the fact that I still had 20 miles to run. It was a very overwhelming thought and I started to cry. I had maybe 4-5 of these crying bouts; they came about, I think, because I felt despair and very hopeless. Knowing that I had to keep running was very hard to accept and crying was my way of dealing with it. With about 4 hours to go I started to pee a pale brown color. I've heard of this before in ultra-endurance races but I was concerned as it has never happened to me. I told Allen and Molly about this and they talked to the onsite doctor.

From mile 34-42 or so I was in the darkest spot that I have ever been in, from both a mental and physical standpoint. I started to walk the mile long hill, several times with both Molly and Allen to keep me company. I didn't want to be alone and I asked them to come with me. Once at the top, however, I started to run again.

I was running painfully slow but, unlike many others, I was still running. With about 8 miles to go Allen and Molly said that I only had an easy 8-miler to go. They told me to think back to my favorite 8-mile run course at home to put it in perspective. I appreciate all of their help in getting me through this tough time. With 6 miles to go Allen asked me to think about my favorite 6-mile loop here at home. I commented that it seemed like eons ago that he asked me to think about my favorite 8-mile loop! No matter what food/drink I wanted and whatever mental support I needed, Allen and Molly were there and went beyond the call of duty.

With 5 miles to go I could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. Food and drink was very unappealing but I took in what I could. Sugar and caffeine seemingly gave no help. On the last loop I asked Allen to get me my good luck charm; a stuff cow named Cowman that Marta gave to me before the race. I carried him with me and, about 3 blocks before the finish, I was given a large American flag to carry across the finish line. I was finally done!! I couldn't believe it! For months I had envisioned what it would be like to carry that flag across the finish line and now I

had finally been able to experience it. My run time was 9:02 which still blows my mind. I never thought I could run that fast for so long in a race like this. My run time was 2 hours and 4 minutes faster than the next best runner. My overall time was 25 hours and 56 minutes which was good for first place! I had won the race by 3 hours and 59 minutes. I still can't believe it!

The last 3-4 hours of this race were extremely challenging; much more so than I thought possible. I have never done anything that has challenged me both mentally and physically. I used to think Ironman was the ultimate test of mental strength. This race, for me, absolutely blew the doors off of Ironman as far as mental and physical challenge. And I'm awestruck by the Triple IRON racers. Seeing people still running, and smiling, after 50 hours just blows my mind. I'm completely speechless and have a deep respect to these individuals.

The Aftermath

After a few photos with race director Steve Kirby I sat down in a chair and talked to the doctor. He tried to get me to take a few sips of water but the nausea was coming on hard. I sat for a few minutes then walked down the hill to the locker room to take a shower and change in to dry clothes. It seemed I got sicker by the minute. By the time I got in to the locker room I was very sick. I turned on the shower and was totally bummed that there was no hot water; no shower for me. I took off my clothes and sat on the bench with a towel over my head. I was really messed up and I knew it. I get nauseous after all of my long races but this was much more intense. I started to throw up; it was a little at first and then it got worse. I threw up all over the floor and my clothes. All I could do is sit there with a towel over my head. One guy came in the locker room and saw me throwing up and he said "Your body is thanking you", and I simply said I think you're right. Allen and Steve came in after maybe 30 minutes and knew I was very sick. I got some clothes on and they went for the doctor. The doctor had me lie down on the table and put a reflective blanket on me as well as some other insulators. I threw up some more and felt horrible. I couldn't keep anything down. After about 2-3 hours of this the doctor finally suggested I go to the ER as he was concerned. I was so sick and tired I could barely keep my eyes open or my head up. Allen walked with me to my car and he drove me to the ER. I carried a garbage bag in my lap in case I needed to vomit.

At the ER I got to go for a wheelchair ride! They took a urine sample, started an IV, and took a blood sample. They also gave me some intravenous medicine for the nausea which worked quickly. I started to shake and shiver when the cold IV fluid entered my system so Allen kept putting extra blankets on me. Allen said he needed to go home that afternoon and he would check up on me later. After some time I was told I would need to spend the night! What?! I assumed that once the nausea went away they would send me home. No such luck.

After a few hours they brought me to a hospital room where I could sleep and watch TV. After a while the doctor came in and said they had analyzed my blood and found out I had rhabdomyolysis. Basically, from what I understand, in extreme events like this one can experience severe muscle breakdown. One of the byproducts of this breakdown is myoglobin which gets released in to the blood which is then, as normal, filtered by the kidneys and excreted in urine. The myoglobin is what caused my brown urine. High levels of myoglobin can, as I understand, overwhelm the kidneys. More concerning, however, was another muscle breakdown product called creatine phosphokinase (I think that is what it's called) or CPK for short. At high

levels CPK can also overwhelm the kidneys and cause kidney damage/failure. I guess this is what the doctors were concerned about. At some point I learned that normal CPK levels are 5-170; when I checked in to the ER on Sunday afternoon my CPK level was about 1,450! After one day on IVs my CPK levels dropped but on day two they increased again. Because of this the doctor forced me to stay another night in the hospital.

After many blood tests (I'm sick of needles!) and 96 hours of continuous IVs my CPK levels were low enough for the doctor to let me go home. Finally! I will have some follow up testing here at home to make sure my CPK levels have gone down to normal. So that was quite an ordeal. I had expected to get home on Tuesday but I didn't get home until Friday afternoon. I had a longer than anticipated vacation! By the way, the hospital food was quite good.

I really need to thank Allen and Molly once again. Molly called the hospital to check up on me which was great. Allen called often and would even relay information to me so I could be more educated about rhabdomyolysis. Allen even brought some Outback Steak House food to my room one night so we chowed down together. His company was wonderful. He also gave me some magazines and books to help pass the time in addition to some awesome Virginia peanuts and a bag of chocolate chips! My parents and sister called often to make sure everything was okay. I would also like to thank Marta. Marta and I spoke often during my stay. She'd called in the evenings and we'd chat about rhabdomyolysis, the weather, the race, pretty much everything. It was really calming to talk with such a great person.

Thanks for reading!

Matt