

Tuesday, October 18, 2011

### 3x Iron, a Dysfunctional Family Reunion



Friday, October 7th, 2011.

It is still dark at 6:45 am and under 50 degrees.

It seems as though the sun is not going to rise today.

The start of the Virginia Triple Iron, a 7.2 mile swim, 33.6 mile bike, and 78 mile run, is supposed to be in 15 minutes. Steve Kirby, Race Director, herds shivering athletes, friends, and family to the shore of Lake Anna, where a dense fog still clings to the water. We are all grouped together for a photo, and for the magnitude of such a large event looming, there isn't one straight face there. This is just one reason I am standing in line with these other whackos: No Triathlon/Cycling Geek Attitude. This event is simply too long to take seriously. The only thing you can do is keep a good attitude and adapt to the challenges of the weekend.

We get in the water, and I slap a high five with Jaime. To the lakeside spectator, Jaime and I were just amped to be starting, but he and I knew that we were both about to just work on surviving the morning. Last year at the Double Iron, we exited the water dead last, and were expecting to probably have the same result today.

I wasn't sure about him though, as I had heard him earlier, talking about actually training for the swim this year. As for myself, I knew it wasn't going to be pretty, having not swam a stroke since May (I had been living on a mountain for work). My goal was to flop around in the water like a wounded dolphin for about 6 hours, and then start the race.

Sure enough, one and a half hours after the second to last person had come out of the water, I emerged, laughing and apologetic for having my crew sit there by the lake for an entire morning. To put things in perspective, my buddy Andy (who had been training for an English Channel swim) had broken the swim course record that same morning, and was out of the water in 2 hours, 54 minutes.

The good news was that I had stayed on top of my nutrition for six hours, and was coming out of the water with a stomach that was not unsettled. Nicole, Tina, and I walked up to the bike course, and my parents and Amy helped get me ready to sit on the bike for a long, long time.

Knowing my swim was going to be absolutely awful, I planned to make a ton of time up on the bike. I wasn't planning on trying to win the race or anything, because I knew my mountain summer had cut into my training pretty hard. I just wanted to be done by early Sunday, so I wouldn't have to deal with the hot afternoon temperatures on the run.

Friday afternoon was spent just pedaling kind of mindlessly and catching up with guys like Joe Trettel and Sauerbrey, Chris Trimmer, and meeting the new athletes to the sport. The ultra triathlon community is pretty small, so we all know each other from one race or another. It really makes these races seem less like competition and more like family reunion. There are so few people who live this lifestyle, that it's always nice to either vent to an understanding peer about the financial side of the sport, or get a tip as to how they fit the training in around "normal" life. It is a unique bond we share, and it was an honor to meet people like Frank Fumich, who has done some serious adventuring around the world, and Kathy Roche-Wallace, who completed RAAM this year.

We all seemed to be pedaling at about the same rate for most of the ride...that is, except for the other half of Team Awesome, a name which I just made up a second ago. My family (Mom, Dad, Amy), Tina, and Nicole were not just crewing for me. We had a prior arrangement to crew for Ghislain Marechal, from France/Belgium. He was absolutely

wrecking the course, lapping everyone, and breaking the bike course record in the process. He would tell me after the race that his goal was to blow the race wide apart, and it worked. He was going so fast, that everyone else thought they were going too slow. For many, it was their first Triple. Numerous athletes either dropped from the race or dropped down to the Double Iron as a result of him.

When night fell, most people stopped riding side by side, and began the tedium of clicking off mileage in the dark, in silence. For some reason, I rarely remember the events of the nights spent cycling in these races. It was cold. The toll of the ride was beginning to show, and highs and lows were rearing their heads. You might pass someone pedaling at 60 rpm, lights wobbling as they tried to stay awake in the late hours of the night and early hours of the morning.

At some point just before sunup, I was absolutely frozen, and on the downhill into the turnaround, I found myself nodding off. I elected to crawl into my sleeping bag and pass out for 20 minutes or so. At this point, Ghislain and Kamil were already off the bike and waging war on the run. Needless to say, I wasn't very happy about still having a significant chunk of mileage to do on the bike. Pretty sure I wasted a lot of energy on the swim just trying to get it done.

I got back on the bike, and stayed there, secretly hoping I would find a point of ignition like I always seem to during the last miles of the bike, and be done by noon. Generally my last miles are the quickest and happiest, but this would not be so today.

By 10am, I was pissed. The sun was coming up, and I had to ditch layers of clothing, which required stopping. This irked me even more. Somewhere around noon, I still had 50ish miles to go, and the Double Iron athletes were flooding the course, and I had my second meltdown in 2 hours. So bothered by still being out there pedaling, I began ignoring my crew, because I knew if I opened my mouth, anything that came out would be evil and irrational. Instead, I did the self-destruction thing, and let Mr. Hyde take over. Whereas I was ignoring my crew and wasn't eating, I was becoming erratic. Every now and then I would just take off sprinting and swearing on my bike in a temper tantrum.

Off the bike around 4pm, I pledged to the crew that the run was NOT going to go like the bike. I was going to stay positive if it killed me. Nicole ran the first 14 miles with me, and then I grabbed my iPod and plowed through a marathon. The first 45 miles of the run went by in a blink, and it was nice to run with Amy here and there. We all watched in amazement as Kamil finished his last lap and broke the course record, finishing the race in 39 hours, 55 minutes.

For a long time, it seemed like a lot of the Triple athletes weren't even on the course.

Perhaps they were crashing during the coldest part of the night?

Somewhere around the 52 mile mark, I began the early morning stagger, and elected to take a short 20 minute nap before things got bad. Attitude was still great, and I wanted to keep it that way.

Daylight came, and with it, the Virginia heat that seems to cripple me every year there. With 20ish miles to go, the heat was in furnace mode, reflecting off the pavement. I hit the port-a-potty to bag balm my problem chaffing and umm...tend to business. Ghislain had been done for a while (2nd place!) and was hanging with the crew. He and my Dad got a bright idea. I came out of the toilet to applause and cameras everywhere. Looking above, the finisher's banner had been placed over the toilet. Everyone laughed. It was a moment of levity that was certainly needed.

Another lap or two later, I had to put my feet up, as they were swelling like crazy. In an attempt to stay positive, I exclaimed, "After this, only 8 laps to go!" My dad misinterpreted what I said and agreed. After a lap, he realized an error and corrected me on the next lap. I still had 9 to go. In these races, this is an absolute detriment to your mental status. I chugged a Red Bull, and Mr. Hyde came out for two fast laps. Slipknot blasted in my headphones, and I went to a very dark place in my head. Other athletes tried talking to me, and I couldn't do it. Just couldn't. The only thing out of my mouth would have been just awful. I NEEDED to bring the lap count to something that was manageable in my head before I could be social again. Those 4 miles were the fastest of the whole run, over 60 miles in. Someday, I will find a way to keep Mr. Hyde on for a whole race. There has to be a way to harness that.

I spent the next 5 laps just walking. The heat was broiling, and there was zero shade. I resigned myself to the fact that I would be walking the last few laps, and that I might just as well enjoy it. Ghislain biked alongside me for a few laps, forcing me to dump freezing water on my head. We shot the shit and laughed, while I tried not to complain too much. He peeled off to bike alongside the legend Guy Rossi, who was running in the Double, and finally there were two laps left. Jake Holscher's crewman picked up where Ghislain stopped. We talked about his ultra running, and the possibility of him doing this one day.

Before I knew it, I was on the last lap. The last lap of these things are always kind of cool. It's a celebration of the events, highs, and lows of the weekend. All of the Double athletes were cheering as I passed them. I said goodbye to Adam at the run turnaround, who I met in '09 here at the Triple, and started the last mile of the 78 mile run. Down the last long gradual hill, and across the shade-less false flat, I looked down to the finish and saw a small crowd gathering.

This was it. The memory of the 2009 injury and DNF could now be forever forgotten. Grabbed the American flag, and the anthem began blaring.

Crossing the line, I finished about 7 hours slower than I hoped, but overall in a great mood. It was an awesome feeling shaking Steve's hand, and having Team Awesome be there for the photos. One of my favorite parts about having crew from all eras of my life at an event, is seeing friends of mine from different times of my life meet and become peas in a pod in just one weekend.

Thanks cannot be said enough to Amy, Nicole, Tina, and my parents, as well as Ghislain for riding alongside me at a time where I may have had another meltdown if left to my own thoughts. Just an amazing weekend!

So, to the resume, add the 2x, 3x, and 5x. Steve said it best:  
"Those numbers add up to 10. Now you just have to go and do them all at once."

Word.

thanks for reading,  
krp