

The Virginia Double Iron

Paul Thompson 8/9 October 2011

I contacted Steve Kirby, the race organizer, approximately 3 weeks before the race start, to ask if it would be possible to get a late entry. He told me that providing I could get entered in the next 24 hrs, I would be welcome to come along. That swung it for me, and so began a rapid process of preparation, spear-headed by Steve himself. He had sorted somewhere for me to stay, (as I would be making the trip alone) within Lake Anna State Park, where the race would be held. Jim and Donna Figlik were the folks that would be very kindly putting me up for the race. And also he had contacted fellow competitor Dominique Le Plant, to arrange transfers from Ronald Reagan Airport. I had first met Dominique at the Lensahn Triple IRON race, earlier in the year.



Gwen Dal and Dominique

The race was to start on Saturday, so I began my journey on Wednesday morning, setting off from my local airport – Humberstone – Amsterdam – Detroit, and on to Washington D.C, arriving around 18.00hrs local time. I really like to fly with KLM, so feel lucky that we live just 15miles from the airport.

As I was collecting my bike box, Dominique spotted me and came over to help,- great timing! We passed through the airport and on to the street. Here I met Dom's son Gwen Dal. His grasp of the English language is exceptional, which was fortunate as my French is minimal unfortunately.

We picked up the car, including sat nav and set off for Lake Anna. It was a pleasant evening with temperatures in the high 60's, quite a contrast to the conditions I had left back home.

D.C traffic was very heavy early evening, so the journey took around 3 hrs to travel the 85miles to the park. We reached Lake Anna and followed

signs to Cabin No2. I was greeted by Jim and Donna who made me feel very welcome. Dom and Gwen had a Camper Cabin a little further down the road.

Jim and Donna had travelled down from Chicago the day before, they were to be supporting their daughter Erika Laiche, who was entered for the double, she was arriving on Thursday, from San Antonio, Texas. Jim and Donna were ok with me putting the bike together straight away, in fact Jim just by chance, had a bike stand in the car, so the job was made easier.

In the morning, Jim offered to recce the bike course with me. He had been at the race the year before, so was familiar with the bike route. The route was tree-lined and sheltered. It started with an ascent from the lake for around half a mile, before leveling out and meandering through the forest up to the park gate. Here was a turnaround that would be marked with a cone. then it returned back down to the lake and the tented athlete village, turning once more around a cone. A distance of 5miles, to be repeated 45 times. I liked its simplicity, the quality of surface and its self contained appeal. Thanks Jim.

On our return to the cabin, we managed to coincide with Donnas' preparations to go out for a run. Donna was heading out for a taper run, as she was taking part in the Detroit marathon the following weekend. Perfect! I put on my runners and joined her. The run course followed the bike route, for a large part before branching off and taking in a section of the cabin approach road. The 2mile out and back would need to be covered 26 times. Both courses are great! I was really looking forward to the prospect of racing at this venue.

Later that day I met up with Dom and Gwen, and Dom and I swam in the lake. The course was set up and consisted of 4 buoys in a line. These would need to be lapped 12 times for the double iron. The temperature of the lake was fairly high and made for pleasant swimming. The water was dark with alluvium, and probably allowed around 1.5 m of visibility. Overall I was very happy with the swim course and couldn't foresee any problems.



Donna and Erika

That evening Erika arrived, and I was kindly invited to a cook-out at the cabin! It was great, and very much appreciated. Erika was attempting the double for the second time, having DNF'd 2 years previous, whilst around 200 miles into the bike. She had struggled with maintaining her core temperature, into the night. In my experience of this type of racing, it's a situation that often arises, and seems to be quite final once an athlete is affected. Erika was very positive about her forthcoming race, and I was very keen to see her race unfold. Jim had let me see the crewing plan that Erika had prepared for them, it left no stone unturned! – I was very impressed, and wondered about my own level of preparations.

A game or four of Slam Scrabble after dinner, and then it was time for the all important early night on the eve of the eve of a big race.

The next day, Friday, saw the start of the Triple Iron event. I watched the swim start and then saw the first few athletes out onto the bike course. I then headed to the local supermarket with Dom and Gwen to pick up race food and drinks. We both opted for the polystyrene ice coolers with the

bags of ice, – perfect for keeping milkshakes, cokes and red bulls cold. These would prove to be invaluable during the race. Later that afternoon I got to swim a lap of the course with Erika.

The pasta party and race registration took place later that evening, here I met the guys from Quebec, Daniel, Michel and Jerry. Michele was the founder of the Levi Double, a race that I am very interested in, should it ever return to the circuit.

I also met my support crew that Steve had kindly arranged for me, Tonia and Angel. They were the parents of fellow competitor Nathan Hardeman. The reality was that I had access to 3 possible crews! I was completely spoilt for help.

Race morning, and I awoke around 4.00 a.m. Shortly after I began the routine of breakfast which consisted of Special K, bagels with butter and strawberry jam along with a banana and tea with sugar. I had slept for about 6 hours and felt quite refreshed.

Around 5 a.m. Jim gave me a lift down to the athlete village in order for me to set up my food table and prepare transition. I had a shared shelter with Guy Rossi and Nathan Hardeman. Inside the shelter there was a large tressle table with numerous chairs. The organization concerning the welfare and comfort of athletes and crews is first class and certainly adds to the race experience.

I have to admit that after having a look around at racers food tables, I questioned whether or not I'd gathered enough food and drinks for the race. I reminded myself that I wasn't a big eater of solids, and that, what I did have, had been tried and tested over several races during the season. The fact that I was racing without Steph, Fin and "the crazy crew" further unnerved me. Race nutrition would normally be in their control.



We all gathered down by the side of the lake and began our patient wait for the fog to clear. The start was scheduled for 7.00a.m, but visibility was so limited that we couldn't see the first buoy. We continued to wait until 8.05, at which time it was decided that the swim must start in order for all the race and post race plans to happen.

Off we went into the unknown. I initially seeded at the front and tried to follow the lead swimmer. In addition to lacking the pace to follow, I had a complete loss of vision, due to misted goggles combined with the foggy conditions, today was not a good day to wear well used eyewear. It was very difficult to sight and I

kept finding myself swimming off at a tangent to the general direction. There were several instances when this happened and I would find myself alone and without a clue as to the whereabouts of my fellow swimmers or indeed the shoreline. I was forced to listen out for swimmers and then swim towards them. It was frustrating and difficult. I tried swimming without goggles by placing them around my neck and attempting to smart it out, to little avail. I then tried swimming without goggles but with my head out of the water, but this proved very tiring for longish stints. The only option I had was to swim alongside a fellow competitor with my goggles on.

With this solution in mind, I broadsided David Jepson and swam alongside him for a while. Then I took a decision to bridge to a faster swimmer, and so began a 7 lap shadowing of Deb Battaglia. Deb assured me at the turnaround that she knew the way, so I had no option but to follow. Thanks Deb.

The mist began to clear late into the swim, and the sun started to shine through. This caused visibility to worsen on the outward leg but hugely improve on the inward. I decided to take my chances and swim for home, solo.

Tonia had waded into the lake throughout my swim to give feeds. We had agreed that I would take feeds after 1 hour and then again after 1 hour 30 minutes. The reality was 1.08 and 1.37. Eventually I exited the lake after 2 hours 8 minutes. I asked Tonia where I was positionally, and he thought 2nd place. I felt happy that I'd made it out the water in a positive position despite the uncontrollable situation I had been in. Water temperature was 21 degrees C.

A 4 minute transition and I headed out onto the bike course to begin my tally. I felt comfortable and was eager to learn who it was who had dominated the swim. As the laps mounted up, I became aware that the chip system in place was working well and this provided reassurance. There were 2 chip mats on the course at either end of the bike lap. This assured me that with 2 bleeps to each lap it was going to be difficult to not get a true tally.

The bike portion evolved and adopted its usual track race feel, whereby my fellow competitors could be measured for progress and regress at the various cane markers around the course.

The great weather that we were experiencing added to the upbeat mood of the ride segment. I was particularly pleased to see my housemate, Erika, join the course, with the race clock showing around 2hrs 56mins. From an earlier conversation, it was clear that she was very chipper about this. I was enjoying the moment and having some banter along the way.

My hydration and feeding strategy seemed to be working. I maintained good appetite and thirst and kept topside of my electrolyte intake. It was warm but not uncomfortable, possibly around 25degrees C during the afternoon. My crews worked very hard to keep me going, I was taking all items on the fly, so must really thank them for their focus and vigilance, it can't be easy to stay alert and tuned in for almost 12 hours, especially when being called upon every 14-15 minutes, to hand over milkshake, coke and red-bull, oh and porridge! thank-you, Jim Donna, Tonia, Angel and Gwen.

As the bike leg came to an end, I was notified by my crew that I was possibly 45minutes up on the next racer- David Jepson, which translated as around 3.5 laps, given that it was around 10pm and speed was likely to drop in the dark. I completed the bike segment in 11hours 25 minutes. Jim then kindly attached my bike to the car rack and took it back to the cabin.

I made a change and joined the run course. At this time there were a lot of triple runners out there. My first lap was approximately 19mins 30 seconds, which I was surprised about. The 2nd lap, I turned in a 18.30 and then proceeded to reel off 8.40/ mile for a time. I felt really quite strong for the opening 10-14 miles, but then for the next couple of hours found myself wrestling with sleep deprivation, and the downturn that goes with it. I remember talking to Donna and telling her about how bad I felt, and then I took a caffeinated drink, and shortly after, the race was back on. I'm not sure how you go on, should you not have a crew. I mean, who do you winge too?

By this time, David was putting his laps down at a fair pace. I settled with the assumption that he was experiencing the same early energy and enthusiasm that I had encountered, so decided to monitor our crossing points. I continued to do so with avid interest. It was very clear that David was gaining ground, to the extent that he eventually came past me. This was quite disconcerting, so I decided to just keep running, no walking, just running. Later that evening I regained my position.



I finished the run segment in a time of 9hrs 30mins, to give me a finish time of 23hrs 33mins and 1st place.

The mist that we had encountered at the swim start greeted me over the finish line. I thanked my crews and then Jim kindly dropped me off back at the cabin. I then had a few hours rest, before showering and cycling (in a fashion) back up the hill to the course and down to the athlete village. There was a good atmosphere down at the finish line, and it was enjoyable to do some supporting. It was special to see Erika realize her race plan. Later that afternoon Steve put on a barbecue for everybody in the vicinity, which was a nice touch, and very welcome.

That Evening we went to the vinery for a prize giving banquet. Despite a lot of tiredness, it was a great way to end a great event- a really fantastic package of a race.



Next morning, Dominique and Gwen picked me up from the cabin and we travelled to Washington. They dropped me off at a hotel and then headed home, Thanks guys. I then spent two restful days around Washington, enjoying an evening bus tour of D.C. Probably the best way to see the capital, given the condition of my legs.