

Here's my RACE REPORT from The Double Anvil (281.2) - Oct. 9 & 10
Warning: It's long (but so was the race - 32 hours).

There are moments in time that you will cherish forever. I just had one. I set a BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal) and it pretty much played out perfectly. Well, there were a few complications, but that is to be expected with a BHAG.

The Prelude

It all started with a casual conversation at Jax Truckee Diner a couple days after Ironman Lake Tahoe in September, 2013. I was sitting in a booth with my buddy Chris and a guy walks by and strikes up a conversation. He had done the race and asked if we had as well. We got into a brief conversation. He was British and was in California for the race. Turns out, he was a triathlon junkie. He had done 45 Ironman races around the globe and was a certified tri coach in England. Then he shared excitedly, "And I've done one Double!"

I perked up sensing his excitement and said, "Really! Wow...where was that?" He said "Virginia." Being a native Virginian, my curiosity was immediately aroused.

That was the beginning.

A year later, I was chatting with my friend, Debbie, in Colorado before we were racing Ironman Boulder. I asked her if she had ever heard of these ultra triathlons? I pulled up the site for the Virginia race on my laptop and told her to hold onto her seat.

Like me, she was surprised to get a peak behind the curtain of this alternative world of hard-core endurance athletes who did Ironman races as training workouts. I told her that I wanted to do one, I had already contacted the race director and was going to volunteer for the race in a month to check it out for next year.

By the time I volunteered, it was on my bucket list for 2015. Since then, I have trained for The Double Anvil – a 281.2 mile race consisting of a 4.8 mile swim, a 224 mile bike and a 52.4 mile run.

There are lots of reasons why I train and do races, but certainly one of the most important is to push my limits for personal growth. I ventured into Ironman races over six years ago because I knew that I wanted to up my game and go to new places physically and mentally. It was time to up my game again. And this definitely fit the bill!

Race Week

Like most athletes, I have "race nerves" to manage the week before the race. This was different though. What I was planning to do was so BIG and had some real unknowns, not the least of which was sleep deprivation and going for up to 36 hours. How would my body and mind respond?

For most of the week, I had an aching stomach, like a pit was sitting very heavy inside me. I knew it was race nerves and I was a bit frustrated that it started so early and wasn't subsiding. Sleep was also a challenge, much more so than usual.

I employed different strategies to address my nerves throughout the week, but I was definitely challenged at a deeper level than I've ever been before. On the night before the race, when my daughter and her boyfriend arrived at my house from Charlotte, they excitedly asked how I was. My response was more hesitant, more guarded and more anxious than expected. I really dislike the "waiting." We laughed and joked about it, but I knew I had to "get it together" before the morning.

Race Day

I awoke at 3:51 a.m. The alarm had not gone off. But there was no rolling over and retreating back to my warm bed. I was wide-awake. I managed about four hours of sleep. Little did I know I would be up for the next 45 hours. I took a deep breath. This was it. The day was finally here. I knew I was ready. Now, it was game day.

The nerves had settled a bit. The waiting was almost over. Within 30 minutes, my daughter, Crandall, and her boyfriend, Shannon, and I were in the car for the hour plus drive from Richmond to Lake Anna State Park.

The Swim

The athletes, volunteers and support crews walked down the hill to the water's edge. It was 6:45 a.m. After group photos were taken, 21 athletes from around the world, the farthest traveling from Japan, entered the water and stood waist-deep in the lake.

I quickly stuffed my nutrition, a water bottle filled with my Perpetuum and a spare pair of goggles in a drink slot in a floating raft, set up for the athletes so we wouldn't have to climb out of the lake if we needed something at the end of one of our loops. Managing my intake of nutrition and hydration throughout the next 36 hours was going to be critical. And it all started with the swim.

We were about to embark on a 4.8 mile swim, (12 loops of the buoys). I quickly adjusted my goggles as the countdown from 15 seconds began. And we were off. The first lap, and the next 7 to follow, went well. The water was calm and I felt good. Nice and steady, knocking it out, one loop at a time. I stopped at the end of loop 8 to take a quick gulp from my water bottle and crammed a couple of Shot Blocks in my mouth. I readjusted my goggles, waved to my support crew (which I did at the turning point of each loop) and did a dolphin dive to start loop 9. My right calf immediately locked up in a massive cramp. My entire leg seized below the knee.

My mind quickly raced to my experience in Ironman Coeur d'Alene four years prior. I had both legs cramp up for practically the entire 2.4 mile swim. While I was not happy about my current predicament, I knew in an instant that I've been down this path before. In addition, when I do swim workouts and I cramp in a pool, I practice a mental strategy of relaxing my leg while continuing to swim. While I could stand up in a pool or stop at the end of the lane to work out a cramp, I employ this routine for precisely this situation – to be able to handle cramps in the open water. No need to panic. I've got this. Within 100 yards of swimming, I was cramp-free and feeling relief. First disaster averted. I was sure I would be tested again later in the day or in the night that loomed ahead.

Soon, I found my body rocking in the waves. Being lifted up and down with each stroke. At first, I thought a boat must have gone by and created a wake in its path. Then I realized there was no boat. The early morning calm was gone. The wind had picked up. The last three laps were going to be more challenging. But I was happy the end was in sight.

I swam to the final buoy for the final lap. Ahhh! As I climbed out of the water, my crew quickly rushed to my side, excited and cheering me on. The first leg was done. I was the sixth racer out of the water and I had just swum the farthest I've ever swum. So far so good!

The Bike

It was now time for 224 miles in the saddle. I started my first loop and felt strong. I was passing other bikers and the thought ricocheted through my brain, "Am I not pacing myself correctly? Should I slow down?" Your race can end abruptly if you don't properly pace yourself for the long haul. This is definitely not an Ironman or a shorter distance race so your race strategy has to be different. As quickly as the thoughts bounced in, they bounced out. I was riding "my race at my pace." No need to second-guess myself. It felt good to be one of the stronger riders in the field, even though I was a bit surprised since I was competing against a very seasoned field of ultra-endurance athletes.

I was strong, steady and was probably the third or fourth fastest biker on the course. Then it happened. A moment. A quick, disastrous moment. My focus wandered for a split second. I reacted to recover, but it was too late. My tire caught a jagged edge of the pavement and I found myself bouncing and skidding on the asphalt.

I was down. I felt a searing pain on my elbow. Then my knee. And then my shoulder. "Oh, my shoulder." As I rolled over on the ground, two bikers who heard me crash (we had just passed each other going opposite directions on the loop), rushed to my side, "Are you alright?" one said. I looked up in a daze and replied, "I think so."

My attention quickly diverted to my bike. Was it ok? Did anything get damaged? I immediately noticed my aerobars were slightly askew. I twisted them with my hands. It seemed to help a little. Was there anything else wrong? My heart stopped and I took a deep breath as I climbed back on the saddle.

Instead of turning back to the start/finish transition area, I kept heading straight to finish Loop 19. As I got to the turnaround, I yelled to the volunteers to notify the race officials at the other end that I was coming their way and I needed the bike mechanic to check out my bike. After I passed them, it occurred to me that I should have asked for the race doctor to be notified as well. But I was less worried about me than the bike. Worst case scenario, I had duct tape in my emergency first aid kit waiting at my tent for me.

By the time I finished the loop, the athlete's village (the start/finish transition area) was buzzing with news of a downed cyclist. I handed off my bike to the mechanic and staggered down to my tent to meet the race doc. He looked at me and immediately zeroed in on my shoulder. My most expensive cycling jersey had a nasty tear across the left shoulder. The doc asked me to raise my arm and cross it in front of me. It hurt, but I was able to do it. My shoulder wasn't dislocated or separated, just badly bruised. Relief.

About that time, Kirby, the Race Director pulled up in his golf cart to check on me. "Do you need a set of training wheels?" he asked. Laughing, I retorted, "Apparently, I do!"

Doc started tending to my flesh wounds. The worst ones were my elbow/forearm and my knee. After they were dressed, I asked him if I needed to take off my jersey so he could get to my shoulder. He said it wasn't necessary given the easy access he had with the gaping hole. Both the doc and I decided there was no need to change jerseys; I looked like a "badass" with my bandaged body and torn jersey. Perhaps not completely averted, but another disaster down.

As I climbed back on the bike, crew members and supporters clapped and cheered. And I smiled...a big, tooth-grinning smile in appreciation. Only 130 more miles to go on the bike. I quickly realized the silver lining from doing my tango with the asphalt. I felt the constant pain from my crash and it took my attention away from my tired legs.

The downside was it made me a more cautious rider. I knew that I couldn't have another mishap or my race could come to a fast halt. I'd give up some speed for safety at this point.

There were some random drops of rain hitting the pavement by late afternoon. Immediately, B.J. Thomas's hit "Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head" started playing in my head. I started singing it and as the words came out of my mouth, I realized how perfect they were for this moment in time:

Raindrops keep falling on my head
But that doesn't mean my eyes
Will soon be turning red
Crying's not for me 'cause,
I'm never gonna stop the rain
By complaining,
Because I'm free
Nothing's worrying me

And another verse, one of my favorites has a particular poignancy. I immediately think of SpeakUp and The CKG Memorial Foundation for which I'm raising money through this race. It's a cause that is near and dear to my heart. The foundation raises money and provides education and support for teens dealing with depression and mental health challenges. (Bless you Cameron!)

But there's one thing I know
The blues they send to meet me
Won't defeat me, it won't be long
Till happiness
Steps up to greet me

I get back to the end of the loop and shared with my crew that the lyrics were dancing around in my brain. Katherine, crew member extraordinaire quickly said, "We'll sing it with you on your next loop." As I swung in for the next loop, I stopped long enough to lead the chorus in our very own rendition. We were causing quite the commotion in the athlete's village, but no one seemed to mind.

The rain never really materialized...well, not until later. Night settled in as one loop collided into the next. On lap 30, Crandall and Shannon, asked if I wanted one of my rain jackets. I deferred saying I would wait. About 12 minutes later, lightning illuminated the evening sky. Another couple of minutes as I passed the turnaround, the sky opened up. Rain started pelting me. I saw hail bounce off the black pavement. Perhaps I should have grabbed one of those jackets. Damn!

Within moments, I was drenched from the downpour. One of my pre-race fears was coming to fruition. As I rolled into the athlete's village ten minutes later, I looked at Cheryl, another amazing crew member, and shouted, "You have much better connections than I do. Can you put in a prayer for the rain to stop?" She got right on it.

About 30 minutes later, the rain slowed down to a light trickle. As I was cruising in the dark, and the rain tapered off, I thought to myself, "I knew Cheryl could do it." Ahh, the power of the right crew members! I looked and felt like a drowned rat, but there was a smile on my face.

Loops dropped away one by one. Soon, I was climbing off my bike. It was over 15 hours of actual saddle time. You really don't know the true meaning of "relief" until you're able to pry your aching buns off a tiny rigid seat designed by some sadistic Italian cyclist.

Transition

As I was changing into my running gear and taking in a late night meal of rice, my massage therapist, Randy Brown, from Muscle Mechanics, pulls up. It was 1:45 a.m. He had just driven an hour and 15 minutes in the dark to come give me a post-bike massage. Cheryl had made the arrangements with him (I knew she was an angel), since she is also a loyal client. I didn't have the nerve to ask Randy to come out in the middle of the night; clearly beyond the call of duty. But here he was. Eager and ready to put his magic hands to work.

John, a crewmember and father for another athlete in the next tent over, looked at me, sprawled out on Randy's massage table and asked incredulously, "Are you here to have fun?" I knew where he was coming from. His son was racing and was going for the overall win. He was hyper-competitive and a pedigreed endurance athlete to boot who only slowed down if there was something seriously wrong. And here I am getting a massage. I responded, "Heck yea!" John was clearly not impressed by what he perceived as my lack of competitive fire.

To be honest, I was anxious to start the run, but I wanted Randy's long trip to be worth it for him. And it did feel so good! My left hamstring had been feeling unusually tight for the past 15 hours.

Randy wrapped up his handy work, and I took off. After I flew by for my first run loop, John looked up in surprise. He made a comment and I said, "See, the massage helped!" I was out on the course making up time on everyone, including his son. I focused on my run strategy. And it was working. (John's son actually did win the race, but my run leg was about 40 minutes faster than his— thank you Randy!) I love it when smart race strategy triumphs!

The first marathon (it's a double marathon at the end), clicked off fairly quickly or so it seemed. The second one, not so much. But I was doing ok relative to the other competitors. There was about an hour or two – predawn – where the sleep deprivation hit me. There was some persistent stumbling as I struggled to keep my eyes open. "But this too shall pass," I thought. And it did.

As the sun began to rise, so did my spirits. And the spirits of my crew members and supporters who waited eagerly for my return with each loop. By the final five loops (10 miles), my gang was in full-on party mode. Their cheering got louder and louder with each of my return visits to the athlete's village.

And then there was my buddy Jeff. He decided his “official” support role was to entertain. And he did it well. On one loop, I returned to see him doing the hula in a grass skirt, on the next loop he was a Chinese emperor and on a third loop, he was a Roman gladiator.

And then, I came running in for my 25th loop (next-to-last), and my crew is standing behind the turnaround cone all wearing t-shirts that my daughter had made for me as a surprise! The shirts had “Will Power” across the front above a large pic of me from one of my first triathlons.” How freakin’ cool! Lot of high fives and a big hug and kiss with my daughter and it was time to finish this.

The Bell Lap. It’s time for my final lap. I change into another t-shirt that I had made for the race finish. My crew members had been wearing them since day one. But I had refrained until now. On the front, it read:

I can.
I will.
281.2

On the back, it read:

Whenever I doubt how far I
can go, I remember how far I
have come. I remember all the
fears I have faced, all the obstacles
I have overcome and all the
battles I have won.

I’ve got this.

I walked over and gave my mom and daughter a kiss and I started my final two-mile loop. I savored each step. Before I knew it, I’m coming into the home stretch. I’m met with the American Flag to carry across the finish line. As I continue to the final steps, the national anthem is played. I feel blessed. So very blessed. My crew and supporters, along with everyone in the athlete’s village is on their feet cheering. A tear starts to sneak out onto my cheek.

The emotion is one of pure joy. While achieving my BHAG was amazing, having people I love dearly there to share it with me took everything to a much higher level.

I crossed the finish line in 6th place in 32 hours plus some change. It’s easy for me to see how I could shave some time off the next go round (particularly with the crash). Yes, you read that correctly. There will be a next time. Perhaps not “the Double.” Maybe I should advance to “the Triple?”

Let’s face it I’m not getting any younger; At 57 years bold, I was the oldest finisher of the race. The average age of the first five finishers was 14 years younger than me; the average age of the athletes who finished after me was 11 years younger. Not that I’m competitive at all; just sayin’!

It Takes A Village

Deep gratitude to my amazing crew: Debbie Kampman (Crew Chief), Roger Kampman, Crandall Turner, Shannon Murphy, Cheryl Michael, Bruce Amateau, Katherine Zampolin and Chris DeStefano. You made it fun. But more importantly, you lifted me up more than you can possibly know. I am humbled and blessed to call you dear friends.

Thanks to Randy Brown for his “magic hands” and going beyond the call of duty. Much gratitude for those who cheered me on from afar and special thanks to those who came to Lake Anna to be there for me: Jennifer Yeager, Sophia Yeager, Grace Gallagher, Clair Handy Norman, Kim MacMillan, Stephen Anonick, Mel Swain, Bill Mims, Janice Shaheen, Susan Reeb Miller, Jeff Ore and Jackie Turner.

And to all those who helped me surpass my fundraising goal for The CKG Memorial Foundation (Speak Up) to support teenagers who struggle with depression and mental health issues. I am truly inspired and thankful for your generosity and giving spirit: Jeff Ore, Ronnie Hucks, Kristen Cavallo, Bobby Kelland, Kim MacMillan, Terri Huddleston, Tim and Megan McCreary, Tim and Ellie Beyers, Greg & Deb Roth, Bill Sims, Melanie Swain, Lee Byrd, John and Katherine Zampolin, Tom and Liz Ebel, David and Grace Gallagher, Beth Lamp, Tina Shiver, Jennifer and Troy Yeager, Mark and Cindy Shoemaker, Glen Maravetz, Michael Keene, Susan Blair, Frances Newton, Brian Pitney, JD Daus, Dave Cocke, Angela Yang, Greg Mack, Brooks Luguire (LGA), Steve Young and Margaret Hardy.

We raised \$3,094!!! (110% of the goal)

