

Michael Ortiz

October 19 at 11:42pm

Clipping the Cutoff for a 421.8 Mile Race

“Stop looking at your watch! Just go!”
“But I have to know my pace.”
“No, you don’t. Give me your watch. It’s mine now.”
“Wait a minute.. (pun intended, lol)”
“Do you want to finish?”
Reluctantly hands over watch

That was the conversation I had with [Jade](#) with 18 miles left and about 4 hours to run it. On any other day, that would have been more than enough time to cover the distance, but on day 3 of a Triple Anvil, that was cutting it dangerously close to the cutoff. The race didn’t start out in such a stressful manner, though. In fact, after day 1, I was a little behind schedule, but I felt fresh still and confident I could cross the line before 7pm. Here’s how it went down.

My dedicated crew was three strong and consisted of: [Valerie](#), the Caretaker; responsible for pace, nutrition, and sleep management. Her brother Albert, the Problem Solver; responsible for being at the ready with Escalade in tow should there have been something that we needed but didn’t have – like Chick-fil-a sandwiches at 3am. And [Reinaldo](#), the Enforcer; responsible for making sure I wasn’t dilly-dallying between laps. His most common phrases were “You’re still here?” “Do you want to win this race or not” and “Sprinkles are for winners. Hurry up and finish so we can get some ice cream.” To be sure, without this support group, I would probably still be out on the bike course in Lake Anna State Park, lost and confused, wondering when ice cream would happen, but that’s beside the point.

Our journey started Tuesday, when we left the city to drive to Virginia. This part I don’t remember much, as I’d knocked out fairly quickly, but if my watch is any indication, the trip took about 6 hours (thank you Albert for driving). We went to the hotel I booked and I quickly realized it was nothing like what I had expected. For one, it was under total renovation. So after checking in, we checked out 5 minutes later and searched for another hotel, eventually finding a two bedroom suite 30 minutes from the race venue. Tuesday night, we went to Walmart to pick up tents, sleeping bags, bedding and nutrition. Then we went back to the hotel packed and planned a pace/sleep schedule (thank you, Joey, for the guidance). Wednesday we checked into the race, gave blood samples to measure hematocrit levels, and had the pasta dinner and race briefing.

While checking into the Triple, I ran into many familiar faces from the last two Doubles; Joey, [Sarah](#), [Aida](#), [Laura](#), [Dan](#), [John](#), and [Ronnie](#), to name a few. Race directors [Steve](#) and [Teri](#), of course, were there to conduct the briefing. It felt like a family reunion of sorts, and I was a lot more relaxed for this than I was for my first Double when I’d shown up to Florida the night before the race with a bike, two bags, and no hotel room or crew. I was woefully unprepared for that one, but thankfully the Anvil family looked after me. Other racers I know and admire were doing the Quintuple ([Johan](#), [Dolph](#), [Steve](#), [Shanda](#), [Mark](#), and [Erik](#) among others) had been going at it since Monday or Tuesday, depending on whether it was continuous or one-a-day. After the briefing, we went back to the cabin and it was lights out).

Race Start 7:00am Thursday

The race, of course, started with the swim, where racers had to swim 7.2 miles (or 18 laps) around buoys installed in Lake Anna. Though it was chilly on the morning of the Triple start, we really lucked out with weather as the skies were clear and it would get warmer throughout the day. The water, however, was perfect at 70 degrees. I later learned the reason for this warmth was because the lake is used to cool down parts of a nuclear power plant located not too far away. But no worries; I haven’t grown any extra limbs yet, so I think everything is ok. But back to the swim. There was some fog on the water, but not severe enough to delay the race start as it had the day before. Once the horn blew, we were off to start something 60 hours into the unknown. For many, this was our first Triple, so there really weren’t many data points with which to gauge things like sleep rationing or pacing. This would all be a learning experience.

Immediately into the swim I had problems with my goggles. They fogged horribly at the start and remained problematic for the first 2-3 hours of the swim. That really surprised me because I’d gotten them specifically

because they were anti-fog goggles, and when I used them for the Oregon Double, they were the best eyewear I'd ever worn in the water. On that day, however, I was really frustrated with them. I kept having to stop at each end and wash them out with water. I even found a sandbar near the third buoy, where I could stop mid swim to clear them. John told me about spitting into the goggles, a method which was new to me, and it worked in delaying the fogging effect, but not for long. The only thing that really helped was when it got warmer outside, which wasn't until about 10am. During that time, my sighting was poor and I found myself course correcting a lot when I eventually came close enough to make out the buoys. I figured it was all just part of the challenge and kept it moving.

By the time my goggles were no longer an issue, I was about two laps behind everyone else, but I didn't mind. I was just happy to have clear sighting at that point. I'd be lying if I said I swam perfectly from that point on. Swimming straight was still challenging, as I found myself being swayed by the small swells that kicked up around 11am-12pm. It was silliness really, because those swells were really small, but rather than get upset about it I rationalized it by telling myself that fatigue 5 hours into unknown territory was probably compromising the strength of my strokes. During the final two laps, I had the lake all to myself. I just wanted to be done at that point, because my arms were tiring, but also because I knew everyone else was already starting on the bike. Each time I finished a lap and went to get nutrition, Rey was by the shoreline yelling, "Chop, chop; let's go." Lol. At the end of it, my Garmin read 8.2 miles, which means I swam 1 mile more than was necessary.

Swim-to-Bike Transition 1:30pm Thursday

Finally, it was done. I exited the water, a bit unbalanced. Teri came over to explain the first partial loop of the bike course, but between being a little discombobulated from the swim and getting anxious that I was building a deficit, I took in maybe half of what she said. I went into T1 (transition from swim to bike) and took my time changing. I'm not a fast T1 transitioner, and the reason is because if I'm going to be on the bike for the next day, I need to make sure I'm comfortable. That, and it's also impossible to put on any kind of compression gear after being in the water for so long. Also, you will be happy to hear that I did not log into work to work on the weekly publication. My focus during that time was success at the Triple.

Bike Start 2:30pm Thursday

I felt fresh as a daisy starting the 336-mile bike ride (or 60 loops on a 5.5 mile loop). It's amazing how you can go from feeling drained on the swim to feeling excited to start the next discipline. My crew and I knew this would be a long one because of the distance, but also because cycling is not my strength. We had a plan and we knew what we were doing with nutrition. I also wanted to push out using caffeine for as long as possible, having not had a decent cup of coffee in the last week and a half, lol. After completing the initial partial lap from the lake, my first loop was a recon loop to gain intelligence of the bike course, which I had biked in my sneakers. Once that was done, I went back to transition, had a meal, switched to bike shoes and started riding loops for as long as I could. My crew in the meantime set up our camp area for the overnight shift.

My favorite part during this time was that I got to say hi to all of the other athletes doing the Quint and Triple. I caught up with [Steven](#), who I hadn't seen since the Florida Double. He called me the raciest person he'd ever seen on Facebook, and that put a smile on my face. This was the period the bike course was packed with the most racers. I had to savor it because those numbers would surely dwindle heading into the nightly hours. I stopped after 40 miles to refuel. I acknowledge this is inefficient, based on the far more experienced cyclists taking food and water bottles on the go without stopping, but I hadn't trained for that kind of fueling strategy and didn't want to start then. My stops were far and few and I kept them short, averaging 10min each break.

As the sun drew lower, so did the temperature. I was 5 laps behind everyone else. With each passing loop, I kept putting on more layers in order to combat the drop in temperature. With 5 layers on and 3 pairs of pants, I was ready for the 40 degrees that we would eventually feel. Around 11pm, I started getting drowsy behind the wheel. Learning from my many mistakes in Oregon, I stopped at the campsite and took a 10-minute nap. My crew watched after me to make sure I didn't fall into a deep sleep. When I awoke, we decided it was time for a Red Bull, and Valerie started tracking my caffeine intake. I fueled on electrolytes, Gatorade, and a Chik-fil-a dinner Albert and Rey got for me. While I was eating, Rey and Albert swapped out bike lights, checked tire pressure, and made sure my bike was good to go. And then I was off again.

Staying awake would continue to be challenging throughout the night. [Joey](#) and I eventually started riding side by side, figuring that conversation would keep us alert. It worked. We eventually caught up to [Laura](#), who joined

our group. And together we battled the darkest hours of the night. At some point it was so cold that my hands were completely numb. I couldn't find my full length bike gloves, so Joey lent me his light up ones (pictured in comments below). Between Joey's light up rims and the light up bike gloves, we were styling for sure, haha. We all knew that once we got to daybreak, we would be re-energized and things would be a lot better. Val was keeping track of my times after every lap and I was running a little behind (pictured in the comments below). Joey's crew and my crew were sitting in chairs in front of our campsites, looking out for us. They stayed there all night long for us, something we greatly appreciated.

The combination of sweat and cold temperature didn't make for a very comfortable ride. Right before dawn, I took another 10min nap. When the sun came up my crew had breakfast for me. Oatmeal never tasted so good, haha. Somewhere around this point I hit the halfway mark at 30 laps in. Other riders were in the 40+ lap territory. I had to make up some ground. I rode all through the morning and afternoon. At some point during the afternoon, I hallucinated and thought someone was speaking to me. I responded with "yes" and then realized no one was there. I couldn't get off the bike soon enough, haha.

In the mid-afternoon, Joey and Laura were just about wrapping up their bike segment, while I had 12 laps left to go. I caught a flat about 1 mile away from transition and because we had to make room for the bike light at night, we had to remove the flat change kit and had forgotten to put it back on. As I was walking my bike back, I was overwhelmed by the amount of people who were willing to help. Other racers helped me walk it back since I was in bike shoes and they even called ahead to make sure someone in the transition area was ready to help. [Mark](#), who was well into his run for the Quint, ran my bike back for me. It absolutely amazed me. Then, at transition, Laura's boyfriend [Scott](#) and one of Josh's crew helped fixed my flat. Joey's coach provided a 700x23 inner tube since I couldn't find mine in time while searching through the bag. They told me to relax and eat something while they fixed it. I never witnessed a flat fixed so quickly in my life; these guys were done in under a minute! Once my bike was ready, I was on my way to finish the last 12 laps (thank you, guys!).

I wanted to be done, but I was also tired from sitting on the bike. It even hurt to sit down, so I took the remaining laps 3 at a time. Right before my last loop, I took a break and had a wardrobe change into my running gear. My intention was to get off the bike and get to work on the run, the one thing I had anticipated all race.

Bike-to-Run Transition 11:48pm Friday

This will probably be my fastest ever transition in a triathlon. In a matter of 90 seconds, I switched from finishing biking 336 miles to starting a three-marathon run.

Run Start 11:50pm Friday

Once I was in sneakers, I was off. Most others were just finishing their first marathon, while I was just starting mine. During that time, [Shanda](#) was just finishing her Quintuple run, with just a few laps to go. She kept a phenomenal pace and she finished her Quintuple in style. I ran fairly fast laps all through the night. Each time I passed the timing station, Teri and Steve would tell me to slow down so I didn't blow up. In retrospect, they were probably right, but it's hard to be rational when you're so far behind. As my pace wore down, I started to feel the coldness of the night, so I again started adding layers. Once I got to daybreak, it was time for another nap, except instead of 10 minutes, I took 15. It was tough to start up again after this because it was so cold outside. It was about 6:30am. Val helped me focus on nutrition. I took vitamins and had breakfast, and I was off again.

I ran until about 9:00am, where I had my first real doubts about finishing the race. At that point, I needed to run at a 5-hr marathon pace in order to finish by 7pm, which was the cutoff for the race. With the pace I was keeping, it was possible, but I knew that eventually, that pace would wear down. I decided I couldn't stop from that point on. I posted a note on Facebook to try and draw some inspiration from friends. It was just such a low point for me and I cried for a bit while running at a 10-11 minute pace because after being awake for two days, real men cry, haha.

At some point I ran into [Stephen](#) and he asked how I was doing. I told him I was so far behind and that I was experiencing a low point. He told me not to worry and that a low point takes 40 minutes to work itself throughout. He sounded so confident with his words and I took solace in his confidence. It turns out, he was right. Deep down I had known that to be true, but after being awake essentially for 50 hours, it can be hard to

be rational.

I continued to run from 10am-2pm, eventually taking a break to remove clothing layers, as it had started to get hot again. This is where my nutrition plan failed. I was so concerned about making time that I wasn't stopping to eat. My 20-minute loop pace hit a hard wall and the loop around 2pm took me an hour. I was death marching my way into camp. Someone came to me and started a conversation to keep me alert, but I was a bit confused about who she was or why she was there. Then another oncoming runner came and offered potato chips. Like magic, I immediately sprung to life after these chips. And then it hit me that I wasn't taking in salts. I ran the rest of the way into camp and declared that I needed Gatorade, food, and a 10-minute nap. It was this point where the Enforcer and I got into a fight. Rey woke me up after 10 minutes and I told him, "I need 5 more minutes." He wasn't having it. He said I had to get up. I said no. Val tried to intervene. We all fought for 5 minutes, which was the time I'd asked for to sleep. At the end of it I asked for 2 more minutes. Then Rey reported me to race director Teri, who came to the tent and got me out.

Teri told me "You're going to finish this race. I know you can do it. What do you need?"

"I think I have blisters on my feet."

"We'll have Doc patch you up. Do you want a burger?"

"Omg, you have burgers??"

And then I got up.

Doc patched me up and I was off running again, with burger in hand. I only got a few laps in before I had to stop again. I never got blisters on the soles of my feet and these things hurt. In my haste to run a fast 3-marathon race, I'd forgotten the most basic of ultrarunning laws: change shoes and socks every half marathon or so. That's when Jade came into the picture. She helped drain my ailments (a quite painful affair), took my watch, and told me I had to lay it down for the rest of the race. I thought she was telling me to lay down on the ground, and she said "No, lol, I mean go fast."

So I did. From that point, I kept a 20-minute loop pace for hours. Everyone cheered me on and it gave me such confidence. Watching the Quintuples finishing their races gave me inspiration. Watching [Dan](#) fight through two marathons when he thought his race was over after the first marathon gave me hope. And exchanging smiles and positive messages with [Ruth](#) and Laura and everyone else on the course that late Saturday afternoon kept me smiling and made me feel like the happiest guy in the world – because I knew I had a fighting chance to finish this thing, as long as I kept fighting. Volunteers, crew members at the transition area, hearing [Vasilis'](#) words of wisdom and his messages passed along from [Thor](#), [John](#) providing moral support, and [Boyd](#), [Zen](#), [Patrick](#), and [Johan](#) cheering me on – they all kept me going through those dark hours. I had to keep going. I had no choice. My crew, who so diligently and lovingly stood by my side for 3 days did not waiver one bit and neither could I – I had to do it for them, too.

When 6pm rolled around and it was clear I was missing the cutoff, I became discouraged, but Jade told me to keep going. Don't stop, keep going. Even when it hurt, she told me to keep going. Jade and my crew ran that last lap with me. We crossed around 9:15pm. Steve and Teri stayed until the end. It was quite emotional seeing them there at the finish. It'd taken me 62 hours and 9 minutes to get there. Of those who finished the Triple, I came in last, but my effort on the run was good enough for the second fastest Triple run for the event. I battled hard during those last 21 hours and so did everyone who supported me. The number one lesson is don't give up - we are capable of amazing things.

After a well-deserved shower in the warm bathhouse, we went and picked up a large pizza pie and garlic knots to bring back to the cabin. The last thing I remember as I laid down on the bed was "I can't wait to dig into that pizza." And that was the last thing I remember, as I quickly passed out.