

Training

I set my sights on completing an Ironman after qualifying for Boston 07 in the fall of 2005. Bought a "good" bike in March 2006, and with the help of Kim Haris's neighbor and the Pharmfliers cycling group at work, I learned to ride with my feet clipped into those damn pedals. After a few weeks, I achieved major success by managing to get through a few rides without falling down.

In Don Fink's book "Be Ironfit", I learned that swimming is a "technique sport" much like golf – you don't improve by just banging out lots of miles like in running and biking. Rather, you must swim with good technique to reduce drag and save energy. In fact, if you just swim a lot without trying to learn technique, you just practice bad habits.

Interestingly, after buying the book, I searched for a local master's swim class, and found that Don Fink and his wife Mel (both of whom have been in the Ironman championship in Kona HI) ran a swim class right across from where I work. The stars just never align so well – this was meant to be, so I stayed with them for over 1 1/2 years and ran into a lot of other triathletes who had already completed or were training for an Ironman. In spite of my efforts, including private lessons, I never moved from being a horrible swimmer to a mediocre swimmer and I remained in the guppy lane (lane 1 of 4) the entire time.

The 30-week training schedule, which I got out of Don Fink's book, was designed to be time efficient, and wasn't too onerous until the "peak phase" in the last two months. I started the program in April 07. Weekdays were usually about 1 hour of bike-run, plus 2-3 swims/week. Mondays are always rest days. Weekends got progressively longer from about 1 hour each day up to 6 hours bike followed by 1.5 hour run in the peak phase (the other weekend day was about 3-4 hours of combined bike/run). At least once per month, I'd disregard the schedule and run a 20-miler on one of the weekend days just to stay in marathon shape.

Along the way, I participated in several triathlons, just to get the practice of transitioning from one sport to the next and swimming with a bunch of people bumping into each other and potentially kicking me in the face. I started with a half-iron distance tri, which I found to be easier than a marathon since you use a variety of muscle groups, not just running muscles. I probably did around 5-6 tri's, including sprint, Olympic distances and another half iron, and learned that I was a horrible swimmer, but better-than-average on the bike and the run. So I am usually way behind after the swim, but end up passing a lot of people on the bike and run.

I also learned from reading and talking to some veterans that the primary reason for non-completion is inadequate hydration and/or inadequate fueling. Apparently you burn around 750-1000 calories/hour over potentially 12 or more hours. And although even the daintiest among us has enough fat to supply enough energy for the entire day

of racing, "fat burns in a carbohydrate fire" so if you run out of carbs, you run out of ALL fuel, including fat. For the nutrition geeks who want to read further, there's a great article on fueling for endurance events sent to me by my friend, Weight Watcher leader, and fellow triathlete, Lani: <http://www.slowlitch.com/mainheadings/coachcorn/racefuel.html> So I trained to take in about 500 calories/hour, including sufficient hydration, for however long it took me. I also did the carb-deprivation/carb load thing over the seven days prior to the race.

Yogi was right

The week before the race, I developed a mild backache. Initially, I wasn't concerned because the pain wasn't bad, and there was plenty of time before the race. I loaded up on naproxen and tried to avoid anything that would aggravate it. But it seems that just being in the sitting position at work etc was enough to make it worse, and by Tuesday, I called Steve's ProCare Physical Therapy begging for an appointment and a miracle that afternoon - the day before my flight to Panama City FL. They kindly squeezed me into their busy schedule and I felt better after they worked on me, but no miracle cure. They gave me some exercises which I did every 2 hours for the next several days, which helped, but I still had significant back pain when I tried to run.

On Wednesday, we traveled by plane, connecting flights, which involved more sitting. Diane did all she could to help me by carrying the heaviest bags, lifting them into the overhead compartment, etc. but the back pain just seemed to wax and wane between almost normalcy to times when I couldn't tie my own shoes. I tried my bike for about 20 minutes on Thursday and found it to be OK. On Friday, I participated in an organized swim on the actual swim course for about 20 minutes and that was OK too. I got massages, did my exercises, pushed the naproxen dosage, and still had back pain when running. The only thing that seemed to result in any reliable relief was using some pain killer pills that I had left over from previous issues.

My emotions waxed and waned along with the back pain as I considered the huge investment I had made in dollars, time and energy, all possibly culminating in a DNF, or worse, a Did Not Start. Also aggravating the emotional situation was the fact that I could see the buoys for the swim course from my room, and I felt like I was constantly being stared down by my "opponent". When you looked out, the last buoy was so far out that you could barely see it, and you not only had to swim out to it, but then turn left, swim parallel to shore, turn left again and return to shore, only to go back and do it all over again on this 2-loop rectangular course. Since I swim only slightly faster than a rock, and never that distance in salt water, I was starting to get concerned that I wouldn't make the swim cut off time and be Dnf'd. But I eventually pulled myself out of this pity-party, and started thinking about what I could do, rather than what might go wrong. I CAN swim without pain; I CAN make the swim distance within the cutoff because I did it

in training without the extra buoyancy of salt water and a wetsuit; I CAN probably do the bike portion because my short trial on Thursday was a success. If I finish the swim and bike within 8 hours, I can certainly walk/jog 26.2 miles within 9 more hours to make the 17 hour cutoff. Besides, over the many weeks of training, I always found a way to work around the events of daily life and get it done. So the night before, I decided that I'd drag my sorry butt to the starting line and walk the damn thing if I had to. I also decided that since the pain killers seemed to be working, I'd be prepared to take them and I packed a dose for the pre-race, and carried pre-measured doses for the bike and run, if necessary. Yogi Berra was right: 90% of this game is half-mental.

The Race

I got up at 4 for the 7 AM start and had my breakfast of 4 frozen waffles, 3 Powerbars, and 2 quart bottles of Accelerade that I drank over the next 2 ½ hours. Got into my tri-suit and cover ups, grabbed my swim bag, and went to the transition area to make last minute adjustments. I borrowed a pump from a neighbor athlete to get my tire pressure just right, but the stem on the tire tube broke and the tire went completely flat, and uninflatable. So I ran to the on-site mechanic and he changed the tube and got me back in shape. Diane walked with me to the swim start where I put on the wetsuit, gave her my cover-ups (and oh yeh, a kiss) put on the cap and goggles and went to the start. On the advice of friend and Iron veteran Pete D, I had stuffed a couple Gu gels into the sleeve of the wetsuit, and took a Gu about 10 minutes before the start.

Swim (2.4 miles)

I placed myself in the back and to the right to avoid being trampled in the water by the faster swimmers. The cannon went off and I moved with the herd of about 2000 athletes into the water and started swimming. If you've never swam in a triathlon, picture swimming in a washing machine and that will give you an approximate image. It is very crowded, but the big advantage is that you can draft the herd of people, and you don't have to worry about navigating your direction since it is virtually impossible to swim perpendicular to the direction of the herd. My goal was to just stay relaxed and steady and monitor the intensity of my effort by my breathing. Things were going well and I was actually enjoying the swim in the extremely clear 72 degree water. I got to the buoy marking the left turn and, as usual it got very crowded so you have to be careful and sort of tread water to avoid getting your goggles kicked off. With my head out of the water, I could see the tiny hotel and the spectators looking like ants on the shore, and felt pretty good that I had gotten that far without incident or even being winded. I continued around the course and back to the timing mat on shore and noted the time to be 49 minutes. I doubled that and guesstimated that I'd finish well within the cutoff, even if I was being passed by 75 year old amputees (and maybe even a few rocks) – but still I would make it. Took a Gu gel, which tasted great because it washed the salt

taste out of my mouth. Ran back in for the second loop, which was uneventful, except that I started feeling a little seasick from the side-to-side rolling motion that I use when pretending to have decent swimming technique. Much to my surprise, I clocked in at around 1:26 for the swim finish, which was faster than what I had predicted. However, 1907 of the 2000+ athletes were ahead of me at that point. I ran up the boardwalk to see the strippers (the volunteers who help you pull your wetsuit off) then through the fresh-water showers and started running for the transition. There I saw Diane, staring past me at the ocean, probably looking for the 75-year-old amputee who'd be just ahead of me out of the water. Said hi and continued toward the transition. Finding my bike bag and my bike was no problem, since most of them were already gone. I asked a volunteer to stay with me because he might have to help me get my shoes and sox on, but I got them on myself with no problem – thank God.

Bike (112 miles)

It had been in the 50s that morning, but I made a quick decision based on how warm I felt, to ride in my wet tri suit without a jacket, and this worked well since I was warmed up from the swim and the suit dried quickly. Filled my pockets with Powerbars, pill bottles, Electrolyte supplements put on my helmet and took off. I rode upright and gingerly at first to see how my back would feel, and to have better control in the narrow first miles. Once into the more open part of the course, I tried getting down in the proper aerodynamic position and remarkably had no problem with my back.

For the rest of the bike leg, the most important thing I could do was to focus on my hydration/nutrition routine and avoid accidents and flat tires. My fueling plan called for one gel and one Powerbar plus a little more than one bike bottle per hour for around 500 calories/hour. I keep plain water in a bottle in the front of my bike, and used it to wash down and dilute the sugary gels and bars. At this point, I could use my heart rate monitor to measure intensity to keep myself from burning too much glycogen. It is a flat and fast course, so it was fairly simple to stay in the aerobic zone, adjusting only a few times for headwinds and one hill caused by an overpass. I rode comfortably, keeping the effort relatively constant, with pace varying all over the place, but that was a secondary consideration. Mostly, I was going over 20 mph, and staying in the aero position most of the time, coming out of it only to eat or drink. I monitored the hydration carefully, trying to avoid over- or under-hydration, either one of which can spell DNF. I was a bit concerned by the lack of need for bio-breaks, but I was following the plan I used successfully in training in roughly the same temperatures, so figured I was hydrating OK. From time to time, I took 2 Enduralytes to prevent hyponatremia and/or cramping and never had a problem.

At the halfway point, I retrieved my "special needs bag" that I had packed with 3 bottles of Accelerade. I exchanged those for the empties and took off again. In the last 20-30 miles we were hit with a fairly strong headwind, so I maintained the same level of effort and heart rate, which slowed me by a few mph. With about 10 miles to go, I decided to take a dose of pain pills so that they'd kick in as I started the run. I had eaten all my bars and Gu's and had no more fluid left on the bike - mission accomplished! I had passed almost 1000 people on the bike and now had "only" 936 people ahead of me, although I didn't know it at the time.

The marathon (two 13.1 mile loops)

I gave my bike to a volunteer, grabbed my bike-to-run transition bag, and found a spot to sit down. Again I asked a volunteer to stay with me in case I needed help with my shoes, but again, I was able to get them on without problem. I pocketed a few Powerbars and GU's, jogged toward the run course and had absolutely no back problem whatsoever. (Another excuse down the drain!) My pace seemed only limited by the normal wobbliness that you feel in transitioning from bike to run. In my elation over being pain-free, I was tempted to push a little, but I was determined not to make any stupid rookie mistakes and held back to keep my heart rate within my normal training range. I decided that I'd wait until mile 20 or so, and if there was any gas left in the tank at that point, I'd use it, but not before. I didn't know (or really care about) my pace, but figured I was in the 9-10 min/mile area, potentially giving me a marathon time of no more than 4:22, which is a hell of a lot faster than my earlier doomsday scenario.

From that point, it was just a matter of continuing the nutrition and hydration plan, and holding the pace according to heart rate. In a little over an hour, I reached the turnaround at 6+ miles, still having plenty of energy and no pain. At this point, I started seeing more and more people walking, and I gratefully passed them. I held steady, gaining more and more confidence that I'd make it (and now maybe a respectable time might even be possible) and in another hour I was back at the turnaround to start the second loop. I saw Diane and yelled to her that I should be back in a little over 2 hours and to please charge up my cell phone - she didn't hear me. I took off and recognized that I was passing Frank Ferraro, 78 years old and limping, who had been introduced at the pre-race meeting as the oldest person in the race. What an inspiration that he would even attempt such a thing, at his age, and with a bandaged knee! I gave him 5 and a few words of praise as I passed.

I paused to get my "run" special needs bag which contained a quart of Accelerade. Guzzled as much as I could, which wasn't much because I had been keeping up with the hydration at every stop - they were at every mile. Tossed the Accelerade and decided to rely on the cuisine provided by the organizers. Being on the second loop, everything was now familiar. Even more people were walking, but now you couldn't tell

whether they were on their first or second loop. For my part, I just tried to hold pace, keep up the fueling and go as far as my legs would take me. It didn't seem long before I was again at the turn-around, which would be at approximately at the 20-mile mark. I still had energy and decided to use whatever I had and pick up the pace. I felt like I was doing around 9 minute miles and was passing a lot of people with only one or two passing me. More than one spectator actually remarked to me how strong I looked. There was energy right up to the end. As I entered the chute, I started yelling for Diane because I had pre-arranged that she would cross the finish line with me (the rules allow one person to cross with you, and she had certainly earned her Iron-mate stripes). I couldn't find her because she wasn't wearing her normal marathon ugly green fluorescent hat, but luckily she saw me, and we got a great finish line picture together. Presumably, Mike Reilly, the long-time Ironman announcer yelled "John Fischer - You are an Ironman", but if he did, I missed it and I'll have to get it on the DVD.

I had heard from veterans that it is normal to experience a lot of emotional ups and downs during a long day of racing, and that it is important to try to learn to deal with them during training. I guess I experienced all of the downside emotions before the race, because on race day things only got better and better, culminating with the elation of finishing a damn long race in an unexpectedly respectable time with a marathon of 4:16, with a 9:37 pace for the first half and a (slower than I thought) 9:56 for the second. My final place was 664, which means I passed almost 300 more people in the marathon. That's a great feeling for a gray-haired guy to beat all those 35 year olds, and I can't wait until I reach age 35, when I'll be lot's faster.

You can see pictures at this link:

http://www.asiorders.com/view_user_event.asp?EVENTID=18505&BIB=1904&LNSEARCH=1