

Coach Al's Ironman USA Lake Placid Race Report

July 20, 2008

"Experience is what you got when you didn't get what you wanted to get."

- Randy Pausch (Recently deceased professor of "The Last Lecture")

"Knowing and not doing is not knowing."

- Author Unknown

"Nothing splendid has ever been achieved except by those who dared believe that something inside them was superior to circumstance."

- Bruce Barton
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THE START – THE FINISH: an introduction...

What follows is definitely *not* the race report I wanted to write after my return to iron-distance racing (after a 3.5+ year hiatus) at IM USA in Lake Placid, and I think that's part of the reason why it has taken me SO long to write this report! I just didn't want to do it! As I sit here to finish this, it's August 7th, nearly 3 weeks after the race, and I am still hacking away. Argh!

But...I digress...back to the "introduction." First, I apologize right up front for the length of this report, which seems to be WAY too long as I read it over. As they say, it is what it is. I encourage you to be sure you're in a patient mood before you embark on it. ☺ And yes, if you haven't been able to glean from these few words, the race didn't go as I had planned, but as is often said, that is LIFE!! Stuff happens, right!? ☺ Things often don't go the way we plan or the way we hope. As is often said, "Life isn't about what happens to us, it's about *how we react* to what happens to us....."

I'm going to start with a LOOK BACK...

As athletes, actors, scholars, and so many others the world over, prepare for their key race, game, test, play, or event, the topic of "luck" often comes up before the big day, or moment. In wishing another a good race or show, we hear "good luck!" Similarly, it's often said about the

competitive playing field that we *make our own* luck. What do you think? Some of my friends and family would say that when it comes to iron distance racing, if I didn't have bad luck, I wouldn't have any luck at all! ☺

Don't believe me? Let's look at just *some* of my history as an ironman triathlete: First, there was Ironman California in 2000. Who would know that the race director of this inaugural race would fail to tell the Marines at Camp Pendleton (who were tasked with measuring the swim course) that it was supposed to be 2.4 statute miles, NOT 2.4 nautical miles! If the 55 degree water wasn't bad enough, this "non" swimmer (I know, I know...) and everyone else there, was "lucky" enough to swim 2.76 miles instead of 2.4! ☺

Or, how about Ironman USA Lake Placid that same year: 3 flat tires during the bike, the first at mile 2, and two more with the last at about mile 100 (long after my last tube and CO2 cartridge were gone!), that forced me to ride the last 10 miles up into town on a flat front deep-V clincher wheel. (I went on to run a 3:25 marathon and get my first ticket to Kona!), or....

In this same race the following year in 2001, when I toed the line two weeks *before* my father died from a 10 month battle with brain cancer. Training for that race was perhaps the most sorrowful, challenging, and difficult I've ever attempted, and in a very real way, I only continued with it because it became my medicine and outlet that helped me cope with the most difficult 10 months of my family's life. Or my 3 races at Ironman Kona (00, 01, 04), all of which are universally recognized as perhaps THE most difficult years for weather EVER in the history of that storied world championship.

Despite these experiences and others like it, I'm here to say that while at times it has appeared that some misfortune has followed me from race to race, as I embark on writing this race report, I want to set the record straight for all of you...I know in my heart that I have been blessed and so fortunate to have had the opportunity to HAVE that "bad" luck. In other words, to have been fortunate to even toe the line for these races shows that in fact, I've had some GREAT race days and some good fortune, more than most could ever hope for. I truly have been blessed with experiences and opportunities as an endurance athlete that most who do this sport can only dream of. I feel like I need to acknowledge that right out of the gate as I start typing away here...

Every race - every experience, has a life of its own. I fell in love with endurance racing 25 years ago because I came to understand that the challenges it presented, especially the mental battles,

helped me to become a better, stronger father, husband, person. I've always believed that *a race like the marathon, or an Ironman* (or fill-in-the-blank - whatever distance or event you feel really stretches your limits) *is really a microcosm of life itself*. Ups and downs, emotional highs and lows, pain and suffering, and moments of pure joy, in many ways just like our everyday lives. In the end, *whether it is a race, or our daily trials, it is what we do with the gifts God gave to each of us (along with the tools that we have at our disposal) and how we react to what happens to us, that determines how successful and happy we are*. For now, while I do occasionally wonder why certain things happen, whether in this race or on any other day. I trust that there's a deeper more meaningful reason for it all that at some point may become clearer to me.

In the end, my hope is that all of you reading this can benefit and learn from my experience. That IS the ultimate purpose of this race report and why I coach actually: to help others to learn and benefit from my experience, so that they in turn can empower themselves to be better, and happier, and have improved the quality of their lives in the process. If I'm even remotely successful in that way, then my experience will have had value that goes far beyond my own race resume...

LEADING UP TO RACE DAY...

Training had gone pretty well going into the race. I had completed all of the key workouts I felt I needed to, and while no training period is ever perfectly executed, my confidence was fairly high going into race week. In particular, I was looking back at a phenomenal Ironman Camp up in LP with Koz and Scotty and the other athletes at the camp, especially my teammates, friends, and clients, over a long June weekend 5 weeks earlier. Some tough days in the saddle had challenged my fitness and given me the confidence that, if I could recover in time, I'd be very well prepared toeing the line on July 20, to have a good day in the Adirondacks, and perhaps put up a day that would challenge my best ironman performances of the past. Since I am now much closer to 49 than 48, that are saying a lot.

While I was confident that my fitness was high and I was coming into form, it had been so long since I had raced at this distance, I had very little "feel" for what I was capable of. Part of our confidence over this distance comes from executing workouts and races over a long period of time. The fact was, it had been years since I had gone through this "ironman" training process, and as such, I just didn't have a great feel for what kind of shape I was really in. As I had mentioned to a few other people in the weeks leading up to the race, I really did feel in some

way like a “newbie,” who really hadn’t ever been over this distance and gone through this process before. To take things further, I seemed to take comfort telling others that I had become disassociated with my potential result from this race. I didn’t seem to “care” as much about my finish time or really about how the race would go down. I think in some ways, while it is very important NOT to focus on an end result in a race like this, the confidence to CARE about our result comes largely from the confidence in our preparation. They go hand in hand. I hadn’t really had that recent race experience to look back on (in fact, my June 4th 70.3/Half Ironman finish at Mooseman was my first triathlon since Ironman Kona in 2004), and I think that affected how confident I was. Time would tell whether or not this was actually a protective mechanism of my subconscious mind, or not...

Along the same line, as race day loomed closer, my mindset really shifted such that even more than my actual result from this race, my focus became more and more about simply executing a *smart race*, particularly on the bike. Going in, I’d spent more time than ever with my athletes discussing training and racing with a power meter and continuing the learning process of nailing the perfect pacing and fueling strategy that would allow me, and them, to run our fastest marathon off the bike. Every ironman athlete knows that at the ironman distance, there is really no such thing as a good bike ride that’s followed by a poor run. Everything we do on race day is about setting up the opportunity to run well, particularly late in the run. In this race, I’d have the opportunity to show that I could practice what I preached to all of the folks I coach, by riding at my planned intensity of $\sim .70$, and limiting Training Stress Score to around 270 “points,” and importantly, holding the Variable Index to 1.05 or less and evenly splitting both the 1st and 2nd loops of the ride. If I could execute that kind of a ride, I knew I’d be set up to run to my capability.

Of course, as every ironman athlete also knows, we never really know what our fitness is or what we can expect on race day, until the actual day unfolds. One thing I’ve learned to expect is that no matter how many times I’ve trained for and competed at this distance, every training progression and build in the 12 weeks leading into the race is going to be unique. No two ever come out close to the same, despite some similar approaches in both mindset and planning. Things happen, and each race preparation period takes on its own life and its own unique flavor. That was definitely the case for me, with this race.

A note about SWIMMING....

One way in which this particular Ironman preparation period was unique was in the way I had decided to train for the swim. As you all know who are reading this, I'm a big believer in the value of the Vasa Ergometer as a training tool to prepare for the unique demands of the swim portion of a triathlon. As I planned my training for IMLP, I thought that it would be a great training "experiment" for me to prepare for the swim portion of the race exclusively using the Ergometer. No pool workouts, just the Erg and some open water swimming once the water warmed in the lake behind my home. Would I advocate someone else do it this way? Probably not, but as a coach I'm always interested in using my own training as a way to experiment with different protocols to increase my coaching "toolbox" of personal experiences which I hope, in turn, help me in coaching other athletes. In a way, that's where the quote came from at the top of this report. To know it, I have to have done it! That is just the way I am, and the way I approach coaching...

So as a result of this planned experiment, I avoided the pool in all of my winter time swim training, doing all of my "swim" workouts on the Ergometer. My plan was to get into the open water in the early spring, and from that point, supplement my Erg workouts with weekly open water swims, to give me the familiarity with the water that is obviously needed for the race. The swims I did at the camp on the ironman course confirmed that my training on the Erg had been successful! I swam every day of the camp, completing consistent 32-33min laps of the course without any stress or fatigue. On the last day of the camp, I swam a 1:06 full swim and felt no ill effects from what was an efficient and relaxed swim. In looking back, I had saved myself hours of driving and training time by using the Erg over the winter, vs. normal pool workouts, and had improved my upper body and core strength dramatically also, mainly from using the Erg as a total-body strength training machine that also does a very effective job building swimming-specific strength, power, and muscular endurance. Little would I know during those winter Erg workouts, how important that upper body strength might be in LP...

Finally.....RACE DAY!

I awoke at 4 am after another mediocre night's sleep. That's pretty common for me – I traditionally don't sleep well leading up to big races and this year was no exception. Karen, my wife of 27 yrs, being out of the country on a family trip to Ireland for the last 2 weeks or so, didn't help. I have learned to rely upon her for a good nights sleep! ☺

As I walked downstairs to prepare my pre-race breakfast of two slices of wheat toast and peanut butter and jam, a hammer bar and banana, along with the prerequisite 2 cups of DARK black coffee, I found a blank piece of paper on the countertop that had a large smiley face drawn on it. Low and behold, my two wonderful kids, Erin and AJ, had kept up the tradition they started years ago in Kona of writing me a personal "Dad" letter filled with their special love and encouragement, that I would have to read on race morning. Their support and love, as I embark upon these races, is a reflection of the bond we share, and without a doubt, they are the reason I truly feel like the luckiest man, and father, on earth. Today, like every other ironman I've ever done, their love and support would play a major role and be my inspiration to do the very best that I could on the day, with whatever I had available to me. *(What follows right below is a picture of AJ and Erin. On the next page of this report, I've scanned the letter AJ and Erin (AJ calls his sister, "Sis") wrote to me. I invite you to read it if you would like. It is a personal letter to me, from them, but one worth sharing, because it represents what is the most important thing: our love for each other. If you would rather skip it and read on, please feel free to do that too!) ☺*



Daddy/Paps,

July 20, 2008

It's hard for us to know how to start this because it's been a while since we've written one. A lot of things have changed since you did your last Ironman, but we want you to know that our love and respect for you only continues to grow. After spending time talking to Jeremiah and seeing Anna's face light up every time she sees you, we have really started to see how much of an impact you make every single day not only on our lives, but on countless others. Though this is truly inspiring and we know you will spend a lot of time today thinking about your clients, remember that today is your day. As John Mayer says (☺), it's time to "make things happen for yourself." Today is going to be an incredible day - you have done the training and been smart about it, you will remember what it feels like to do an IRONMAN ☺, and we will be waiting for you when it's all said and done. We know how much you want this day to be over, but try your best to stay in the moment (like Buddha said!). We know that's one of your goals, so make it happen!



Of course, we know this will be your first Ironman without Mom physically here to support you, but remember that you will be in her thoughts all day, no matter where in the world she is ☺ She loves you so much and is so proud of you. In her place, we are here every step of the way, and don't forget it! ☺ We are all so incredibly proud of you - you have no idea how proud we are to call you our Dad, no matter what.

Now - go out there and kick some butt! You are way overdue. ☺ Take it one small step at a time, enjoy it, be safe, and don't forget how amazing you really are. You can do this!!

We love you SO much!!!!

Age!! & Sis ☺☺ xoxo

All other early morning race day preparation went on without a hitch. I made my way down to the transition area at around 5 and with that, got to doing the last minute transition bag checks, getting the tires pumped up and my power tap computer installed on the bike, body marking, etc., along with all of the "good mornings!" and well wishes to the myriad of friends I saw as I went about completing the task at hand. Soon I was walking back to the condo to sit and relax a bit before heading down to the beach and the race start. So far, so good!

This year, perhaps one of the most enjoyable parts of the day for me was this period before the race, because of all of the optimistic energy and hope, and because I was surrounded by family and friends and a few of my clients too, including Anna Sawosko, who was racing her 2nd ironman and full of the joy and smiles and hope that is Anna's nature, as well as Carla and Jeremiah too. Thank you Carla and JC, for sharing race morning with me! I so appreciated that you were there! No mention of race day or family could go on without me quickly mentioning Joe and Audrey, too. Joe's my brother in law – well.....he's as close to a brother as anyone could ever be. I love them both, and their support as my race unfolded, would mean more to me than they will ever know...

As the clock ticked forward, my thought process was to get down to the beach start around 6:30 and begin to make the way through the masses of people to get into the water in time for a short w/up, prior to the 7am start. On the way down, we all made our way over to the Team Pursuit Fitness tent on Mirror Lake Dr. to meet up with another of the athletes I coached who was racing, Basil Ingemi. "Baz" was hanging out and apparently waiting for me to show up, so I didn't disappoint....I went straight over, gave him a big hug, and after chatting for a few minutes, asked him to join me for our walk down to the start. I gave my final hugs to everyone, and Baz and I made our way into the masses of racers, bumping our way through, and soon we took our own path toward the beach and the entrance into the water.

THE RACE START...

My plan for the swim was simple: I would line up far to the right of the start line area, in hopes of getting out and away from the chaos that is always part of this swim, in part because there are so many people, the lake is small, and there is an under water line marking the swim course which many want to follow right from the start.

My plan was to get out fairly quickly as soon as the gun went off and then get into a rhythm quickly, maintaining as easy and relaxed an effort as I could. Regardless of my actual split, my only real goal was to get to T1 and that transition to the bike having used as LITTLE energy as possible to get there! I knew from prior experience that this wouldn't be as easy as it sounded, mainly because of the number of people in the race. When I raced here in 2000, about 1700 athletes started the race. This year, there would be close to 2400 starting the race. Mirror lake is small, and every swimmer ends up aiming at those turn buoys where we all converge, and to make things more interesting, I was expecting a 1:05 to 1:07 swim, which would put me smack dab in the middle of a great majority of the field. The simple fact is, because of the sheer numbers of people, I realistically expected that there would be bumping and tugging throughout the entire swim and that the "washing machine" effect was going to be there throughout. So be it. Let's go!

The gun went off. I put my head down and swam out fairly aggressively. I had practiced this in my prior open water swims and felt this was a safe strategy that would allow me to get into some clean water and to avoid being swam up on by those behind me who were more aggressive. The key was to be sure I didn't go *too* hard and get into any O2 debt. Not good when you're embarking on a 10-11 hour race day! The first few hundred yards went by without too much trouble. Of course, there was a lot of banging going on as everyone tried to claim their space and get into their rhythm, but nothing that I didn't expect or mentally prepare for.

As I mentioned, I started wide out to the far right side of the swim start. My intent was to not get mixed up in the melee that would surely develop. I knew that eventually who was ever to my right might gradually push me in toward the line as we approached the buoy at the turn around, but was ok with that. From prior experience, I knew the first buoy and turn would be the most physical. As the swim evolves, folks tend to settle into "packs" with others who are swimming about the same speed, but that first buoy tends to come up quick, and often before folks have settled into that speed or rhythm.

As the minutes went by and I approached that first buoy, the swim became gradually more physical, as swimmers to the right of me were "pushing in" toward the line, where we all met up with those who had started near the underwater line on the left. We were all converging on that buoy! I have to admit that at that point, I wasn't having a lot of "fun," but I was moving forward, and as always, was committed to the mantra we all know from the movie *Finding Nemo*: "just keep swimming....just keep swimming." As I got very close to the buoy, it was physical! I

remember taking a stroke and preparing to take a breath to my right, when I saw the elbow of another swimmer come toward my head.....and.....WHAM!

The next thing I remember was coughing violently to get water out of my mouth and it appeared, my lungs, and at that same moment, my legs were cramping badly, particularly my right calf. My head hurt as though I had been hit by a Mack truck. As I think back on it now, I was in a complete daze. Things at that moment were happening in split seconds, as I grappled with staying afloat, grabbing my leg to try and stretch out and relieve the cramp, and protecting myself from being buried underneath a swarm of swimmers who were behind me and intent upon getting around that buoy! While it didn't seem important at that moment, my goggles were nearly ripped off of my head as well and seeing at all was nearly impossible, but with the amount of swimmers around me, I didn't need to be able to see to know which direction I needed to go in....

My first reaction after what seemed like a millisecond was to JUST SWIM! My mind was absolutely racing with the thought of, "I've got to get going, start swimming! Swim! Swim!! Go!!!" I didn't have time to think about what I wanted to do, as the beating didn't stop, and there was no place really to go. Those first 10-20 strokes, I'm sure, were the ugliest most uncoordinated I've ever taken, I am sure. I was wreathing in waves of pain from the cramp, but just couldn't stop trying just to move forward. I started to think, "get outside of the next buoy and then you can get to some clean water and get your act together." So that is what I did...

As I rounded the 2nd buoy and made my way well outside of the line that everyone was aiming for, and started to turn back to the start area more than 1/2 mile away, I stopped swimming - and just floated there like a cork, in one spot, waving my arms in the water as I sculled to keep my head above water. I realized at that point, for the first time, that I had blacked out from the shot I took, and was "out cold" for some period of time, who knows how long. I was absolutely overcome with a feeling of anger! How could that SOB whack me like that!??? I was so frustrated, and wanted to be any other place on earth except for where I was at that moment, 1/4 of the way into an ironman swim and what was the beginning of what I knew would be a very long day...

I took a minute to adjust my goggles, finally, so that I could see where I was going. Once I got them adjusted, I realized that the blurry vision I was experiencing wasn't entirely from the misfit goggles. I also was feeling some waves of nausea and even in those first moments trying to gain some composure, felt some dry heaves and a feeling like I wanted, or needed to vomit.

As I floated there and tried to rationalize how I was feeling, ironically my thoughts briefly turned back to my bike crash from May of 05. In that crash, I also blacked out after my head hit the ground and suffered a serious concussion, the effects of which took a couple of months to totally subside. As I floated there, I recognized the feelings I had and knew I had taken a pretty good hit! My subconscious mind raced back to the after-effects of that crash. I felt the same dizziness, and sickness that I had experienced in the days after the crash.

As I think back on it now, what is interesting to me is that at no time during that swim did I ever think about, or acknowledge that I could have drowned out there. Those of you who are reading this more than likely are aware of my swimming "history" and my experiences as a 10yr old. I guess the fact that I never acknowledged that fact speaks to JUST HOW FAR I've come from that earlier near-drowning experience. Of course, I know that is true, but having gone through this, to me, confirms it...

It seemed like I had floated there for a long time. I realize now that it was probably only a matter of seconds, or a minute. Whatever it was, it was far shorter than what it seemed at the time. I remember watching and realizing all of those swimmers who were to my left, who were now swimming away from me and getting ahead of me, and I instantly started thinking, "Ok, time to get moving. Get on with it." So I started swimming....

I wouldn't be honest now if I didn't admit I felt awful for the rest of that lap. I felt sick to my stomach, couldn't really see and couldn't get my bearings, at times feeling like I was swimming upside down, and every time I got horizontal to swim and started kicking, even lightly, the calf wanted to cramp again. All I could think was that I just HAD to keep going and do the best I could, so that's what I did.

As I approached the beach at the end of the lap, I looked up at the clock and was absolutely demoralized to see the clock reading 43 minutes. What I didn't acknowledge at the time was that time included the 10 minute start that the pros got, *prior to* our age group start, so in actuality it was a 33 minute loop despite everything I had gone through. But I wasn't thinking that way...at that moment I was crushed and at an absolute low point. I felt I'd lost so much time, felt like complete CRAP physically, and to top it off, I had one more lap to go....

I made my way up onto the beach, and as expected it was very crowded. As I came around got back into the water, I chose to take a wide path well outside of the line in order to try and

continue to get my bearings and just feel better. The final loop was, compared to the first, uneventful. In reality, I was so focused on just trying to relax and SWIM, that nothing else seemed to matter. I felt uncoordinated and struggled with my stroke. Each arm seemed to want to move on its own, without being connected to the rest of my body. My left and right brain fought wildly with each other: One side telling me that I was not relaxed, not smooth, and definitely not having fun, the “other” side of my brain reminding me to stay in the moment, keep trying, and just keep swimming – just keep swimming – just keep going. As I neared the dock and prepared to exit the water, I stumbled bumping into other athletes around me, and looked up at the clock. Amazingly, I saw 1:09 something, and at the time, couldn’t make any sense as to why I had all of a sudden been able to redeem myself from what I thought was a 1:25 swim (based upon the 43 min I had seen after the 1st loop)!

Swim Split - 1:10:07

I made my way up the carpet and got my suit stripped off, grabbed all of my gear, and was off toward transition. As I looked left, I saw my son AJ and heard him as he yelled out his encouragement and offered his great smile! He wanted so badly for his Dad to have a good race! I looked back, and tried to hide how I felt inside. I couldn’t manage a smile back at that point, but I didn’t want him to know how I felt, or what had occurred. For some reason, I wanted to simply hide from him and the rest of the race, and not be seen at all. As I think back on it, it never dawned on me until I had made it almost all of the way up to the transition area, that at this point it was absolutely pouring rain! I was so absorbed with how bad I was feeling, trying to keep my leg from cramping, that I never acknowledged the fact that the weather had changed dramatically from the start, and had made a major turn for the worse.

When I arrived at the changing tent with my cycling gear, I walked into the tent and looked for a spot on one of the benches to sit down. The place was a disaster area – muddy, crowded, hot, noisy, and about the last place in the world I wanted to be at that point! I sat down, put my head between my legs, and tried to vomit. Waves of nausea were coming on fairly strongly and I was trying hard to get rid of the feeling any way I could. I begin to think about the bike ride, and the fact that I was hardly in condition to ride a wet, rainy course, with a fraction of either my eye sight or full physical faculty, so I said to myself for about the 20th time since the end of the 1st lap of the swim, that I *should drop out* of the race. For some reason though, while I was saying it to myself, I couldn’t actually DO the thing that would take me out, which was to take off the timing chip on my ankle and give it to a volunteer to return to the race officials.

As I was sitting there, a volunteer who was helping athletes bag their gear, came up to me apparently sensing that something was wrong, leaned over, and asked me if I needed any help. I mumbled that I was fine, and just needed a few minutes more to get ready.

"Good judgment is the result of experience - experience is the result of bad judgment."

- Mark Twain

It seemed like I sat there and just did nothing for a very long time. My thoughts floated between being worried that I was going to be a risk to the other athletes on the bike course with the way the rain poured down and the way I was feeling, along with thinking that it was obvious I should DNF. Looking at my split of nearly 12 minutes, hours after the race was over, it became clear how much time I did actually spend sitting there!

T1 Swim to Bike - 11:20

Without actually deciding what I was going to do, I just started the process of getting into my bike gear and getting ready to get out on the bike. I moved slowly and methodically at first, as I continued to struggle a little bit with the same disorientation, dizziness, and feelings of nausea that had plagued me after the hit. At some point during these moments before heading out of the tent, my focus shifted. I became more task-oriented. I started recognizing that if I was going to continue I had to pay close attention to what I was doing and couldn't become distracted for any reason, which might end up leading to a mistake or leading to me being a danger to others...

As I began to push the bike out of transition through the mud and grass, I stuffed my sun glasses into my pocket and got ready to ride. As I rode on down the first hill, I thought to myself that all of the time and effort I'd spent focusing on nailing the right intensity on the bike and using my power meter to my advantage to do that was, at least for the moment, a non issue. The power-tap wasn't working with the rain, and as long as it kept up, I was on my own to establish a smart pacing strategy. Since I've ridden for so many years without a power meter, I feel I have a very good sense of RPE. In 2001, I rode 5:40 on this course in what was a pretty evenly split ride, so I was confident I could do it. The REAL issue was, as I rode off and made my

way out of town, I realized my goals for this ride were quite different than what they would have been, had my day not changed so dramatically during the swim...

THE RIDE...

As the rain poured down and I spun out of town and toward the ski jumps, my focus and concentration were a major struggle. I didn't feel good, and wasn't happy, and the weather, while not a focus, didn't help. I made a conscious decision during this first part of the ride to stay as much, IN THE moment, as I possibly could, and concentrate as much as I could. I thought ahead to the downhill into Keane and knew that would be sketchy and dangerous given the conditions, and my condition. I decided that for as long as I needed to during the entire ride, I would gear down at least one gear from where I thought I could pedal and just hold back, hold back. I made my mental focus all about *feeling better*, and going as easy as I needed to, to feel better. I talked to myself, tried to relax, and said constantly to myself, "feel better...relax...hold back...feel better." I saw rider after rider go past me, which even under normal circumstances would have been happening, because EVERYONE who doesn't race with power or have a good understanding of effort, goes too hard during those first climbs past the jumps. So today, it was even more pronounced.



About 5-6miles into the ride, I realized that I hadn't yet tried to get any calories down. Along with that, I realized I never started the timer on my watch that was one of my trademark tools that I've always used during Ironman to keep me on a fueling and hydration schedule, always with good success. I went down for my bottle, took a sip of my drink, and realized that any fueling for the foreseeable future was going to be nearly impossible. I continued to struggle with an upset stomach and just the thought of drinking that mixture made me gag a bit. I forced a small sip anyway, and decided I needed to continue to try to keep getting it down as the ride evolved. As I continued and contemplated my nutritional issue, I made a decision that if I wasn't going to be able to get the calories down that I had planned on, then staying hydrated and maintaining electrolyte intake was going to be even more important than usual.

To my advantage, I felt pretty confident that I could still complete the race even with not taking in many calories. I had my first ironman back in 98 to look back on.....I had some "problems" with my chocolate GU during that race (long story....for another time!) that caused me to go longer and farther with fewer calories than I had planned on. I knew from my early running days (the days before fueling well DURING exercise became so "in vogue") that I was a good "fat burner" and could sustain a controlled pace for a very long time with no intake of calories, so again, my focus shifted to not forcing calories down until my system could handle it, and at the same time, being sure I did everything possible to keep hydration and electrolyte intake up. I don't think I thought I'd be at risk of depletion per se....I just think it was my way of mentally shifting my focus so as to keep my head in the game and not bail out entirely on doing the things that would help me get to the finish line...

"Racing teaches us to challenge ourselves. It teaches us to push beyond where we thought we could go. It helps us to find out what we are made of. This is what we do. This is what it's all about. "

- PattiSue Plummer, Champion runner and U.S. Olympian

Amazingly, the first loop seemed to go by relatively quickly. I believe I was so focused on being *in the moment* and trying to take care of myself to feel better, that I never allowed my mind to think ahead or to worry about the future parts of the race, or even to get into a 'racing' mindset that would make being patient, more challenging. I didn't wish I was farther ahead or worry about the 2nd half, or anything like that. I just stayed on task, focused on spinning my legs and keeping the overall effort easy, and took it one mile at a time. In what was surely a first for me, I can honestly say I never looked at my watch at all, and had absolutely no idea how fast (or slow) I was going.

When I arrived in town at the end of the first loop, I had probably peded 4 or 5 times to that point, which was more than what I'd consider ideal, but at least I knew I wasn't becoming dehydrated, as I had also been taking in a regular dose of endurolytes (electrolyte tablets, at a rate of 2 per hour) to avoid any risk of hyponatremia or low blood sodium, from the copious intake of water. Also, as I hit town I did take note mentally that I wasn't experiencing any muscular fatigue at all. So far....so good.

When I passed the Pursuit Fitness Tent and the family gathered on Mirror lake drive as I was coming into town, I went by them and flashed a little smile and a thumbs-up. At that point in my day, I knew they'd be thinking "he's not going as fast as we thought he was going to," but I also figured they'd assume it was the weather that was slowing me down. I didn't want them worrying, so I planned to make this trip through town a reassuring experience for them. Mission accomplished!

Lap 1 of the Bike, 56 miles - 3:06:28, 18.02 mph

Lap 2 began the way lap 1 ended. I was dialed in to my conservative pacing and was very focused on the present moment, continuing to try and feel better, which I was doing successfully, or so it seemed. I was feeling fewer waves of nausea, my vision seemed to be clearing (despite the continuing downpour), and I was generally feeling more "normal." I rode through the series of hills out of town and took the downhill into Keane as conservatively as during lap 1. Since I wasn't feeling in "racing mode" mentally, there was no compulsion to push the envelope at any time and with the downhill, that was even more the case. I did spend a little bit more time on the aero-bars as the 2nd loop evolved, and except for some occasional minor twinges from that right calf that had cramped during the swim, physically I was feeling better and better.

Since my system and stomach seemed to be settling, I did occasionally try to take some sips from the bottle, but with only moderate success. As I entered the "out" portion of the out and back in Wilmington at around mile 80, I took stock of the amount left in that bottle (that contained all of the calories I had intended on taking in during the ride) and noted that it still contained $\frac{3}{4}$ of the fluid that was in it at the start. From that, I guessed I'd taken in about 400 calories or so to that point, and began to think that my run was going to be very interesting and probably difficult, to say the least. I knew I couldn't run on fumes, and it was appearing that was about all I was going to have by the time I got off of the bike! I do think this was probably the very first time during the entire ride that I actually began to think about the race ahead, rather than zeroing in on the moment and task at hand. I continued to pee every 10 miles or so, which told me I was certainly over-hydrating, but with my constant intake of Endurolytes and the fact that I was continually feeling better and better as the ride went on, I felt my strategy was working.

As I rode up past Whiteface and the last 6-8 miles of the ride, I came up on Basil (remember him from our meeting at the PF tent prior to the start?). As I rode up next to him, he looked at me completely baffled, and said, "Where have you been!!?" I looked at him, smiled and chuckled – "If you only knew!" Baz is a stronger swimmer than I am, so I believe he expected at some point that I would ride up on him. The thing was, I believe he expected it about 60-70 miles earlier!



As I got through the last of the "Baby, Mama and Papa Bear" hills outside of town, I again made a mental note that I hadn't yet looked at my watch during the entire ride. That, in and of itself, felt so strange! I've never raced and not been cognizant of my splits and pacing. This clearly was a different kind of day! If someone had rode up to me and said I was on 7 hour, 8 hour, or 6 hour bike split pace, I would have probably believed them. I had no idea at all where I was time wise, but I was happy in the realization that I was getting off the bike soon, and for the most part, felt no worse for the wear. I remember thinking as I was about to get off the bike that as far as my butt and legs

were concerned, 112 miles on the bike had never felt so easy. Anyway, I rode past the family on Mirror Lake drive, "low 5'ved" Joe as I rode by (that hurt!), took it around the high school that abuts the Oval, and into transition, readying myself mentally to try and redeem myself, and my race day, with the run.

Lap 2 of the Bike, 56 miles - 3:04:43, 18.19 mph

Ride Total, 112 miles - 3:11:11, 18.10 mph

As I ran from the rack to the tent with my bags, my mind drifted back to 2000 at this very same place and race, and seemingly in the very same kind of situation. That year, I had lost so much time on the bike to 3 flat tires and the problems that go along with that, all of which resulted in me arriving in T2 much later than I should have. At the time I was getting off the bike and heading into the tent, I was discouraged to say the least. But as I sat in the tent getting changed to head out on the run, I remembered thinking about what I would tell the folks I coach and what advice I'd give to my kids, if they were in that same situation. It was clear to me that I

would tell them, "26 miles is a long way to make up for a poor bike ride. You CAN run. Go do what you know you can do, get out there, and run! Damn it, go!" So in that race, that's what I did, and my focus and inner strength during that run, which seemed to grow and grow and become larger than life as the miles added up, allowed me to turn in a 3:25 run split, AND get my first ticket to KONA in the process. By some miracle, I had been able to use my run fitness to save my race, despite the difficulties on the bike. I had lived what I preach, that your day is NEVER done or over until you cross the finish line! Despite my supposed bad-luck, I had the good fortune to find the inner strength to push on, and the fitness to back it up. What a day and what a finish!

Back in the present moment...as my mind went through those events in 2000, and as I walked briskly through the racks toward the tent, I did believe that this year's race could be another one of those years where the run makes my race.

I approached this transition from bike to run, a LOT different than T1. I was more focused and more intent and felt there was hope, if I could just put the run together that I knew I was capable of. On with the socks and shoes, and up and out I went. I immediately broke into a light jog as I made my way past the volunteers who continued to be there, standing in a pouring rain, cheering every athlete on. The volunteers truly were MORE than amazing on this particular day!

T2 Bike to Run - 5:20

"Bid me run, and I will strive with things impossible."

- Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

As I started to run out of the tent, after only about 5 or 6 steps I felt a slight twinge in the right calf that had cramped earlier in the swim. It wasn't much of an issue on the bike, but obviously running placed a whole new stress on the muscle, and with the twinge I felt, all I could think at that moment was "that isn't good." A few more steps and the twinge turned into a mild, yet sharp, pain. I continued to run out onto the road, pass the crowds of people out on the street cheering, and on down the road. My hopes of putting together the run I had visualized and

remembered from 2000 were shattered. I knew instantly that I had better prepare for a very LONG rest of the day....

As I ran on down the road, I saw my son AJ once again along the sideline, as he was cheering me on with his big smile. He began to run along the road beside me, outside of the fence that was set up to keep the crowd away from the athletes, continuing to smile and encourage me, yelling to me that I looked great! I picked up my head, looked back at him, flashed a thumbs up (I think!), and then I just smiled. I mean, honestly...despite everything that had happened, how could I not smile back at him? I knew my day was DONE (at least in terms of redeeming my race from a competitive standpoint), but during those moments as he ran with me outside of the fence, I felt a sense of peace well up inside of me - and a tremendous sense of gratitude. Even at that low moment and realization of where I was and what I was facing, I felt so much love pouring out from his face and smile, I couldn't help but return it to him.

As I ran on down the road, the pain in my calf worsened, and by the time I reached the bottom of the steep hill out of town and knew I was out of AJ's sight, I stopped running and went to a brisk walk to try and relieve the pain. Here I was, at the 1/2 mile mark, in a situation I had rarely ever been in before. In nearly every other Ironman I've ever done, the run has been the part of the race that I could always depend on. Today would be different, in many ways. And the rain continued to pour down...



Once at the bottom of that first hill, I walked for a minute or so until much of the sharp pain subsided and then started to run again, and I repeated that process for the entire first loop of the run, all 13 miles or so. I would run until the pain worsened to the point where I was limping, and then I'd walk until I felt I could try running again. I sensed the runners that were around me were probably going to get frustrated with me, because when I ran, I ran. I wasn't "easy jogging" or dawdling. For some reason, I felt that if I was going to run, then damn it, run. So there were lots of competitors whom I passed when I ran, and then in a minute or two they'd see me walking again, as they ran past me. That continued for a while, and I'm sure quite a few of them were wondering what

I was doing! Maybe most didn't even notice, but I did feel kind of funny about that, for some reason.

I did walk through every aid station and attempted to get in as much fluid and calories as my system would allow. My stomach was now feeling fairly normal and, had my calf not prevented me from running, I think I could have continued to run strong.

As I entered town and neared the end of the first loop, I ran/walked up the hill and came around the corner to see my family waiting in their spot along the fence, not far from the swim start area and beach. I ran up to them, and decided that it was time to tell them what had happened. They all looked at me in shock as I described the day, and in their eyes, I could see how frustrated they were for me. That was an emotional moment, to be sure, and to be quite honest, I don't remember what they said to me, exactly. I know they encouraged me to keep going and just do my best. The one lasting image that is embedded in my brain from that short visit is the look on Erin's face, as I told them what had happened. She looked so sad! ☹️ Never has a daughter ever wished more good fortune for her Dad, then Erin did for me that day, and with the realization that my day hadn't turned out like she had hoped it would, her disappointment and sadness wasn't hard to see. As I readied to continue on, I do remember telling them that it would likely take me a very long time to complete the 2nd loop, but that I would continue and I would finish, no matter what.



As I ran away, I laughed at myself because, like every athlete out there, we always want to "look good" for our friends and loved ones. I didn't want to have them seeing me walking, so whenever I thought they'd be looking, I ran, regardless of how painful it was. Funny how we think that way at times like that, isn't it? Pride is a powerful thing!

As soon as I was far enough out past the special needs to be sure they couldn't see me, I returned to walking. At this stage, after 13+ miles of run-walk-run-walk cycles, my legs got stiffer and running became a bit more difficult each time I returned to it. In fact, I'm sure at this point that my running looked a lot more like hobbling, then running! Ugly.

First Lap of the Run, 13.1 miles - 1:56:51, (8:55 per mile)

As I pressed on and again headed out of town for my 2nd lap, I realized that all of the emotion of the last mile and meeting my family had taken me completely out of my "in the moment" focus. I was now not concentrating at all, and was sure that if I didn't get my focus back, I was going to be in even more trouble. I also sensed that at that point, my complete lack of calorie intake during the course of the day was beginning to really take its toll. As I entered mile 14 and then mile 15, and running became more and more difficult to do, I decided to make fueling and calories my number one priority! I rationalized that perhaps part of the issue I was having with running was because of the lack of calories, and if I totally bonked out here, there'd be much less chance that I would actually be able to finish. And FINISHING this race, no matter what, had become my sole purpose – my sole focus. My thoughts and feelings, in the course of that first loop of the run, had gone from feeling desperate and sorry for myself, to an immense feeling of gratitude, for the love and support of my kids and family, and for the support of my friends, and clients, who also lined the street, shouted my name, and supported me. As I went on, my mindset shifted to doing what I needed to do, to ensure I WOULD finish!! Forget PR's, forget pride, forget looking cool.....GET TO THE FINISH LINE. Finish what you started. That was my only thought....

"Suffering is the sole origin of consciousness."

- Dostoyevsky

By the time I reached an aid station between mile 14 and 15, I felt that I was almost doing more harm than good by running at all. I decided I would walk for as long as it took me to get in the calories I needed, and then see what happened. The next couple of aid stations turned into my own buffet and smorgasbord! I grabbed cups of pretzels, chicken soup, Gatorade, water, and gel, just about anything that I could hold on to, all in an attempt to try and revive myself and prevent further damage. As long as I was walking, I hoped it would all settle and be absorbed into my system. As the miles passed, I saw some of the other folks I was coaching, who were racing, namely Anna and of course, Steve Moseley. As they passed going in the opposite direction, I yelled out some encouragement to them and in a way, felt embarrassed because I knew they weren't expecting me to be walking, that's for sure. Again, that pride thing!

I made the left hand turn out onto River Rd toward the turn around, and pretty soon, I came up on "Baz" again, who I hadn't seen since the bike. We talked a bit as we walked, and I asked him how he felt and encouraged him to start running, to keep going. He said he was having some issues with the uphill and running, but that he'd keep going and would finish strong. Baz would go on to PR by over an hour on this course, and ended up having a very good day, especially considering the fact that, in his own words, he "had no right training for an ironman" with 3 small children at home and a business to run. Long after the race was over, he would text me on my cell phone and ask if I was OK. He said he was "worried," mentioning something about me being 3 shades of blue when we were walking together on the run course...

Speaking of that, as I walked on and approached miles 17 and 18, I began to notice that I was really shivering, more and more, and getting cold. I started to think that if I didn't warm up soon, I'd be hypothermic and THAT would be what would take me out of the race! As I approached one of the aid stations, I rationalized that if I could find a plastic garbage bag to put over my head, I could keep some of my body heat from dissipating and warm up, as the shivering was causing my teeth to nearly chatter right out of my head, and getting steadily worse, almost completely out of control.

I saw a pile of bags lying in a puddle of water near a garbage can (everything was in a puddle of water at this point!), and motioned to one of the volunteers, indicating that I was hoping I could take the bag to use to warm up. He nodded his approval, so I grabbed it, tore a hole in it, and put it over my head. This very large clear bag draped all the way to my ankles and, I'm sure, looked ridiculous. Having it on made getting food at the aid stations around miles 19-20-21, even more challenging, as I had to reach out from underneath the bag to grab the food, then stuff it back under the bag to keep dry while I picked at it continuously. After all, who wants to eat soaking wet pretzels? Yes, the rain continued to pour down at a furious rate, with no break. By now the roads were completely flooded. As I mentioned earlier, the volunteers continued to amaze. They stood in the rain, for what seemed like days to them, I'm sure, and from my vantage point, never stopped offering their help, or support. What on earth would we ever do without the volunteers that go out there, race after race, just to support us?

During most of the early part of those 7-8 miles of walking, I did occasionally try to run, but that lasted for only 6-8 steps. In the cold and wet that seemed to never end, my legs had tightened up and made any semblance of running nearly impossible. However, once I put the plastic bag on my head, I quickly warmed up and began to feel better. My teeth stopped chattering and

some energy was returning to my body, I'm sure in part due to the endless stream of calories I had been taking in for the last hour and a half of walking!

Somewhere between miles 21 and 22, I decided I'd had ENOUGH food! I thought it was time to try running again, and on my first attempt, managed to keep it going for 30 seconds or so before returning to a walk. My calf has loosened substantially over the 7-8 miles of walking, and felt much better. I was determined to keep at alternating walking and running, and TRY to gradually increase the duration of the run portion. I was more determined than EVER to finish this race, and if I could do it at least running part of the way, I would feel a lot better about my effort. So on I went, mixing running and walking for the next mile or so, and gradually increasing the run until about mile 23, when I was running straight, with no plans to stop until I had to.

As I got closer to town and began to feel the energy of the crowd and the anticipation at finally being DONE with this day, an energy and inner strength seemed to build up within me. I became focused not only on just running, but on running as fast as I could, all of the way to the finish. I picked up the pace, steadily, and begin to feel the heat building up under my plastic covering.

My initial thought was that it was time to dump the plastic, but part of me was still a little worried that I might still need it down the road, so I elected to simply take what was draping and throw it back over my shoulders, while keeping the hole around my neck. Little did I realize at the time that I had created was, in effect, a cape. As I ran faster and faster and began passing runners at an increasing rate, the plastic must have been flying up, as some folks in the crowd started shouting "Superman....go superman!" At first it didn't dawn on me how I must have looked, but it quickly made sense.

As I ran up and into the edge of town, I felt like I was flying. Without a doubt these were the fastest miles of my entire run, and all I could think about was getting to the finish line as fast as possible. I had no idea what the time was or what my finish would be, but I was absolutely energized by the crowd, by the feeling of passing other runners, and by the prospect of soon seeing my family and that finish line! I just told myself to "run, faster, faster, go as fast as you can!" At the same time, every so often part of me felt, in some way, guilty for running, so late in the race. I think the racers reading this will probably know what I mean.....maybe you all do.

"You only ever grow as a human being if you're outside your comfort zone."

- Percy Cerutti, famous Australian coach of the 1950's and 60's

I made my way through town and out toward the turn around, and finally determined that I wouldn't need my "baggie" any longer, so I stopped and tore it off of my head, and threw it into a garbage can near the special needs area.

I continued on toward the oval and as I entered and made the sweeping turn to the left, I looked for my kids, as our tradition is for them to cross the finish line together with me. When I didn't see them on the sideline or see them come out to meet me, I immediately felt my "rush" to get there had backfired, as I obviously had gotten there before they were able to get themselves into position to join me. For a moment, I felt disappointed that we wouldn't be continuing our tradition, but never let up on the gas pedal as I headed toward the line with my adrenaline flowing! Of course, in the back of my mind, I had always known that at some point, our tradition would have to end. They are now 22 and 16 yrs old. It is time Dad let it go! They are young adults now, not the kids that they were when this tradition began when Erin was 14 and AJ was 8!

I ran across the line, and in an instant, had achieved what became my singular purpose and motivation as my day evolved. When all of the numbers, splits, thoughts of a PR and a podium finish, wash away, what is left is to very simply, FINISH. My children, my clients, my family, my friends, all became the inspiration for me to do the best I could with what I had at my disposal, at that moment, throughout the entire day.

People ask me how or why I continued on, given what had happened. As I think about it now, how could I have NOT continued on? My only choice, as long as I wasn't risking any serious harm to myself or others (and I never considered that I might be at serious risk) was to not give up. In many ways, this was my most difficult Ironman to date, but it was also one that reminded me, AGAIN, just how meaningful it is to finish one of these races.

2nd Lap of the Run, 13.1 miles – 2:42:01 (12:22 per mile)

Total Run, 26.2 miles – 4:38:52 (10:38 per mile)

Race Total- 12:16:51, 851 overall of 2340, and 88 of 268 in the 45-49 AG.

The Finish...

Just as I learned in my first marathon 25 years ago, when I look back on this experience, I am reminded once again that *the race* IS truly a microcosm of life. It represents the universal human experience that ties us all together. We are all athletes in some way, each facing difficulties, obstacles, and challenges that we never fully anticipate. Through it all, we continue on, relying upon our own inner strength and belief in ourselves, and hopefully, along the way, taking the time to thank God for the blessings in our life, and never forgetting those who love us, and who WE love, who are there for us every moment, to share in our pain and our joy.

Well, as I sit here, I don't know that I have anything else more to say or anything left, and I'm quite sure you are tired of reading! Thank you for taking this little journey with me and thank you to everyone out there who stood in the rain and voiced their support, sending their love to me along the way. Love to all of you...

- *Al*

August 8, 2008