

Road to Ironman



Before I begin this story I would first like to acknowledge the fact that attempting an Ironman is not just a race, it is a journey. A journey that I will never forget and would never have been able to have completed without the help of many friends, family, training partners, local retailers, the desire to bring awareness to the WMAF, and also my very patient wife Margie, the keeper of the “on hold honey do list”. It is a wonderful thing to have so many people’s encouragement and support, for without their involvement it is very unlikely that I could have ever completed this enormous difficult endurance event. It is also worth noting that over the course of a full year of training I covered 239.25 miles of swimming, 4,267 miles of cycling, 756.75 miles of running, and 64 visits to the weight room.

The Journey Begins

This journey began one year ago to date when my good friend Bob Seaman, former valley resident, called me up early one morning and asked if I wanted to do the IMoo (Ford Ironman Wisconsin). Without any thought I agreed. “Well get off the phone gotta sign up immediately”. Registration typically closes out about 30 minutes after opening up online. Upon hanging up I got a feeling in the pit of stomach, what have I done? Can I really do this at age 62? I have completed five ½ Irons and about perished in all of them. Too late now, just dropped 590.00 bucks in an instant, non-refundable too. Life at this point changed. All thoughts, activities, and training will now be focused on this one day a year from now. Two books, lots of advice, and countless articles, especially on the nutrition aspect would follow. Any races between now and then - just practice, train through.

Many who have heard of Triathlons think of them as merely swim, bike, and run events. Not quite true. In the shorter races it is swim, bike, run, and transition. (Transition is the time and place changing from swim-to-bike or bike-to-run). The time spent in transition is more critical in the shorter races, and the past couple of years I have won two races merely being quicker in transition and only by seconds. As the races get longer transitions become less important but a fifth component becomes a factor, nutrition. The longer the race, the more important the nutritional aspect becomes. Nutrition is by far the most difficult to master. It is personal, hard to understand, requires constant experimenting, and can only really be tested in race conditions. Twice in the past year I have ended up in medical tents for very different nutritional reasons; once for over fueling and the second for under hydrating. With as much time, effort and rehearsal that I put into mastering race day nutrition it is what eventually kept me from having a shot at my dream of qualifying for the world series of Ironman, the Kona in Hawaii. Pretty lofty goal I will admit, but I would be fooling myself if I said it was not a dream. The ultimate goal was for both Seaman and I to qualify for the Kona together and share the experience with friends, family, and our communities. I would have had to win my division and Bob would have had to place 7th or better. We both got close, had our shot, but it was not meant to be on this day in September 09.

Training – 12 Months

Twelve months to race day. From September 08 through the middle of May 09 I embarked on a self coached swim, bike, run and weight training programs; and also reading almost anything written on nutrition and training that I could find. By the middle of May I choose a 17 week Ironman training program I found on the internet that eventually became key to my success. The importance of training with a plan cannot be overstated. The value lies in keeping one from over training, under training, staying injury free, and peaking at the right time. Another benefit of a plan is in scheduling. I knew exactly what I would be doing on any given day as much as four months in advance. The older method, which is most common and formally employed, is to decide what activity should be done on any given day based on what went on the days prior with little systematic thought given to the build, recovery, taper, peaking and rest periods that are so necessary in an endurance training program. Rest days were an important part of the plan and welcomed. They might be just biking and easy 30 miles, or might consist of as little as lazing about, feet up listening to music, and a massage (as per Program). Seriously!!! This however did not fly too well on the home front!

It is June now and training is starting to amp up. I am pretty much consumed by the daily training tasks but confidence still fluttering back and forth. Often out of nowhere I would get a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach and a chill over the whole ordeal as my emotions would yo-yo from totally from excited-to scared, confident-to not so sure. It was in late June at one of the Milers 'Fun Runs', that Nancy Drach gave me the most valuable wisdom of all. She had completed this event the previous year and as she treaded water at the start of the swim along with 2400 other athletes, her emotions running just as crazy as mine, this thought came to her, "hey I've done the training. I have to be ready". Those words echoed in my head from that day on and became the guiding incentive for all training. My Program was followed to a tee. If it called for ride 30 miles and I came in at 29, I would top off to 30. Following a plan actually proved far more enjoyable than inventing one as I go method. I looked forward to each day, training through periods of build and rest, build more and rest and so on; swimming, biking, and running, while varying intensities by heart rate zones.

Finally it's August, the month of the heaviest training. My biggest two consecutive training days consisted of a 3mile swim, 115mile ride, 4 mile run on one day, followed by the next day with a 60 mile ride, and a 4 mile run. These were the days I enjoyed the most. I spotted them on the calendar way back in May and couldn't wait to get at them. Loved the challenge and they were great confidence builders too. In amongst 4 or 5 centuries/bricks (a brick is a run immediately after biking) that went on; my fueling program was rehearsed and tweaked constantly, not only in content but in dispersing as well. On bike rides and runs I would practice fueling every 15 minutes, replacing electrolytes every 30 minutes, while trying to match my sweat rate with hydration. Just getting to my fuel easily was a challenge; otherwise I feared the tendency would be to skimp. By the very last ride I had my plan worked out in calories per hour, hydration, and the technique as well. The dispersion system was outstanding, almost never had to take my hands off the bars while riding and with a pair of pocketed shorts from Pearl-I-Zumi, I always had easy access to my electrolytes and running fuels. I also set up mock special need stops and exchanges. The 112 mile bike ride and 26.2 run would each have a special needs bags stops at 1/2 way points to exchange fuels. The ride is about 6 hours long, the run about 4 hours, so I only needed to carry 3 hours of fuel on the bike and 2 hours on the run at any given time before replacing at the respective special needs stops. This was perfect given the size of the bottles and dispersion methods planned. August passes and I have now plowed my way through the bulk of the training.

All of a sudden it's September and my training enters a taper mode. Race is day approaching fast ... exponentially fast. About two weeks before the race I received a **38 page document** of instructions, procedures, maps, timelines, rules, do's and don'ts, and suggestions from the Ford Ironman Foundation.

This pretty much wipes out any calmness left in me. If you screw up on any of it, well, you are pretty much done. In retrospect it turned out to be pretty clear and easy to follow, but it was just very intimidating at first.

Thursday Sept 10th is travel day for the Sunday September 13th race...getting real close now. Bob, who got me into this thing in the first place, flew in from California to meet me there that evening. It may seem arriving 4 days in advance is too early but every bit of time from Thursday on was used. All 2400 athletes have to register, deal with bikes, eat, etc. and yet there no waiting in lines for all the various procedures, or meals, or events. The Ford Foundation did a terrific job organizing this event. At registration we are all given five bags to fill with race needs that get turned in prior to the race. Stuff all over the place, 2400 athletes and it all flowed so smooth. One bag for dry cloths, one for swim-to-bike, one for bike special needs, one for bike-to-run, and one for run special needs. Hours are spent stocking the bags with the correct items. Some bags are left off the day before the race, some on race day, and some with frozen fuels at the last moment. All bags are numbered, labeled, and somehow in the end it all comes back. That is a total of 14,400 bags that get handled twice each by the race organizers! In the days prior to the race there was still one more bag for swim warm-up things that was guarded while doing a last pre-race swim. Fortunately during the few days prior to the race there was so much activity going on that there wasn't much time for nervousness. Prerace dinner was another example of efficiency.

Approximately 4000 people in one room and yet no lines or waiting for meals. Lots of speeches including the Mayor of Madison, (capitol city of Wisconsin). At one point the race director requested for all of those who lost 20 lbs. or more training for this event to stand. Then by 10 lb. increments he went up the scale 30, 40 The last person left standing lost 281 lbs in one year of training for this race! That's more than double my weight. That guy got a well deserved huge standing ovation and he made to the finish line too!

The two nights prior to race day were tough, maybe a combined 6 hours of sleep. On the last night I remember thinking, one solid year of training, all those miles, and just one last night of sleep before **THE DAY**. The moment of truth is almost here. That was a very sobering thought. Tossing and turning, then 4:00am...the last alarm. My resting heart rate was up 10 beats and I hadn't done anything yet! Oh man, I was exploding with excitement, fear, anticipation, resignation. Did I have all the right stuff in the right bags, is my bike set up right, run stuff ready, don't forget the timing chip, cap, set watches, computers, open shoes, body glide, and the list goes on. 3 hours until the gun goes off! OH MAN. What if I fail? All those supporters, friends and the White Mountain Aquatic Foundation pledges. A solid year of effort hangs on the moment just 3 very short hours from now. Margie suggested I was putting a lot on pressure on myself. She's right, but I needed that pressure, thrive on it, and as it turned out I truly believe it is was what ultimately got me to the finish line. My supporters, and the WMAF would be my catalyst, my energy, my drive, my reason, my passion and will to push on when it got tough ... and it did.

The Swim – 2.4 miles

Last minute tweaking the bike at T-1. Then the march to the start line at the beach. It was somber, gut wrenching, filled with nervous chatter, false confidence, anxiety, and anticipation - take a gel, hydrate. The next phase was to push 2397 people into the water to tread water at the start about 50' off shore. 20 minutes to go. The handful of primadona Pro's got to start first, 10 minutes ahead of the other 2397 athletes that all start at the once. The next ten minutes took forever and came so quickly. I found Bob. His head with goggles on looked so insignificant in the sea of people. I must have looked the same. We reviewed our race start strategy. Mine was, go to the front, go out hard for about a minute and try to settle into a rhythm. His was to battle it out in the pack. Then the announcement, 30 seconds to start! OH MAN that feeling in my gut, heart pounding. I'm trying to jockey to the front as I was not the only one

with my line of strategy, push, shove. Zero the watch, check goggles. Push shove. The battle was seconds from starting. Typically I'm in the top 7% in the swim. In a regular size Triathlon that amounts to just a handful of competitors to deal with after a matter of moments from starting, then I can count on smooth water. On this day I would be in the company of 200 swimmers and anything but smooth water. Full on contact swimming the entire way was in store. **Boom! The cannon goes off!** Chaos, thrashing, punching, kicking. I could feel a surge forward almost like riding a wave. I was fortunate to be in the front as most of the chaos was behind me. Those poor people in the peloton. It was a battle the whole way. The course was a two loop rectangular affair. The first task at hand was to turn left at the first buoy. Everyone has their geometry down pat. Shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Imagine 2397 people heading for a buoy as closely as possible to make a left turn. I got punched, scratched, and took a hard kick to the jaw. Although the day was calm the water around me was real choppy, Victory at Sea. Those poor people in the back, it was no picnic where I was either. This is pretty much how it went for the entire 2.4 miles. Never once was I allowed the luxury of ten strokes without running into or bumping someone. Finally, I reach the swim finish, 1:01:30, about 3 minutes slower than I hoped for, but in retrospect it was fine. Still in the top 7%. Couldn't swim any harder because there was no place to get it going, always navigating and bumping. As a result I came out of the water fairly fresh, actually running to T-1 and passing people. That is a bit unusual for me. A stop at the strippers – gottcha!! Wetsuit strippers. And now begin a sadistic six story run up a spiraling helix. Once at the top I grab my bike stuff and checked my watch. 9min, 4sec., ouch, how can that be? So slow! Must have stopped to send out some emails? Maybe a banquet! Got my chops busted on that one from Bob, only to find out days later that I had the fastest T-1 in my grouping. So there. Head out of T-1 on my bike and go. Pretty sure that I was in the lead as all the other bikes around me were still on the rack. This is good. Adrenalin flowing, maybe too much. This is not so good.

The Bike – 112 miles

The bike course went through beautiful Wisconsin farm land, but it was hot, hilly and down right cruel. Later I find out that this was the most challenging course in the Ford Ironman circuit. Figures, Seaman signed me up for this. Should have known better than that listen to that guy. The course is a two loop affair so I got to do each painful loop twice. Oh joy! The road temperature on my computer showed 101 degrees and that is hot. The hills were relentless and some very challenging, not long like our local notches but relentless and very tiring. Once into the ride and calmed down I began my fueling my program, sipping my high octane fuel every 15 minutes, an electrolyte every ½ hour, and trying to hydrate with a bottle every hour. Spectators all along the course added some fun and encouragement. One group of girls near the top of the toughest hill posted sign “Nude Beach Ahead”. Never did find that beach - in the middle of corn fields and cow pastures. Another sign read “Faster Damn It”. The locals just love this race. My fuel change at the half way point went smoothly. I checked my pace at about 60 miles out. I was showing 18.7, outstanding, ahead of plan, and feeling good too except for that kick to the jaw. At about mile 70 and into the 2nd loop I began to feel fatigued. Not a good sign. At mile 76, it happened, some guy with 60 on his calf blew by me. I made an attempt to keep pace but nothing doing. He was hammering too hard. Later I found out he too tired and I actually came out of T-2 and started the run in second place down by only 12 minutes. But I had no knowledge of this. I just pressed on as best I could hoping for the best. I completed the second loop 2mph slower than the 1st. That would be the norm; even the Pros were dropping 2mph. The 2nd loop was hotter and of course a dreaded head wind made its presence. Seaman, by the way for you roadies out there, was holding an impressive 22mph pace with a average heart rate of 140. That's off the charts, plus he was evenly splitting the loops, one of the few. Finally I cruised into T-2 trying to relax only to be greeted with that six story helix to climb again. Who put that darn thing there! At this point I think I would prefer water boarding! That climb was soooo sadistic. Legs cramping and burning. Bike average check showed 17.7; still not bad for 112 miles and

holding back some. Not far off schedule. One of the big stresses triathletes deal with is centered around their bikes. Will it hold up mechanically? Anything can happen on race day. With that said, a huge, huge thanks to Jason Pettengale at EMS for putting up with my neurotic compulsive behavior over my bike. His mechanical expertise and Triathlon wisdom - priceless. My bike ran flawlessly, not even one missed shift. The motor however could use some work.

The Run – 26.2 miles

If there were ever some words I like to take back it would be my conception of the run. I had said several times prior to this day that “I was looking forward to the run the most, couldn’t wait for it, that’s were the challenge is.” Keep in mind that I have never even run a marathon. That is pretty near the dumbest, stupidest, ill-informed, bone –headed statement of my life – period! No doubt an experienced Ironman would croak laughing at that one. This is where it all came apart, and presented me with the most difficult challenge. All the support, WMAF pledges, and well wishers, would prop me up when I was down --- and I was down and almost out. Without that support I may not have made it to the ‘finish line’ and for that I’m eternally grateful.

The 1st mile of 26.2 miles was not so bad, about 9:15 pace (slight down hill), only 25.2 to go. Around mile 3 it happened, I couldn’t take my nutrition. The plan that I spent the entire summer developing was not working. Just couldn’t stomach the stuff. I would try and try but it was causing an awful stomach discomfort that kept getting worse. As a result I got weaker and weaker and eventually stopped running and started walking. By the time I reached the turn around for the second loop I was a mess, barely walking. People following me on computers said they watched me go from 2nd to 3rd on down to 6th. Times went from nice 9:15 minute/mile at the start to 20 minute/mile at a low. By now I had long since figured I was out of any podium possibility so my focus turned solely to finishing (and strangling Seaman for signing me up to this torture). At the halfway turn around, it was decision time, I was really suffering bad. Do I go on? I was feeling awful, nauseous, faint and weak. A whole 13.1 miles left to go and barely able to walk. Seaman caught me at the turn around. It turn out he flatted twice on the bike by mile 90 and was out of the race. What a shame and with a solid 3rd in sight and the Kona in his future. Along with his support, a few by standers, and thoughts of WMAF I pushed on. I went about another 10 feet further and had to stop to again this time hanging onto a fence lining the course, panting and dizzy getting worse by the second. Thought I would hurl or collapse, but there is no place to be discrete about it. People lined the course on both sides of the fence so either I was going to throw up on a spectator or right in the middle of the race course. Not a good place to be in. Fortunately I was able to hold back, barely, and just made it to the next aid station that was only a block away. Aid stations are at every mile stocked with a variety of drinks and foods. I opted for chicken broth and potato chips. The chicken broth was magic, as if a magic wand was waved over me. Instantly my stomach was feeling better. I mean like in about 10 seconds! I’m still very weak but at least now I can run 100’ walk a100’, run 200’ walk100’, and so on. I’m feeling better and better now as the miles go on making sure I stopped at each aid station for chicken broth, potato chips and now I have added flat Coke to the mix. These are three things that just are never in my diet, bad, worse, and awful! I have completely abandoned the expensive high tech fuel program that I had worked on so hard and opted only for the chicken broth, chips and coke for the rest of the race. Could not even put the other stuff in my mouth with out getting that wrenching feeling. As the miles mounted up I was getting stronger and stronger running from aid station to aid station now with out stopping. It was dark from a about mile 18 on. By mile 20, maybe only two runners passed me for the rest of the race and I’m passing hordes of people as I continue to gain strength. By the time I hit mile 25 I am feeling really great, as good as I have ever felt running, ever. Cruising now dudes. Could not believe it, after 139 miles I’m waking up! By the last 1.2 miles I was in a flat out run, maybe one of fastest Tri miles I have ever run. It just felt great – in the zone. It meant nothing because I was so far back, but what the heck I was

just enjoying it so much, so I let all it out. I spot the finish line, or so I think. Turns out to be about a half mile further than I thought. Continue on. Sprinting now with everything I've got left, passing runner after runner and for no particular reason except I was loving it! I spot the REAL FINISH LINE!! OH MAN THE FINISH LINE! I crossed it. I MADE IT! I MADE IT! What a feeling. I did it. I did it. I did it. I AM IRONMAN!! Holy cow what a feeling!!

Two people grab each of my arms as I cross the line incase of collapsing, but I'm feeling just fine. "Leave me alone, I'm fine", but they wouldn't let go ushering me from place to place. Finally I spot Seaman and call Margie. She tells me I got a 3rd by 38 seconds. What, not possible. Absolutely clueless. But so it was to be, my 1st Ironman and a 3rd, as lame as it was, I'll take it. Felt bad for the 4th place guy. Over 14 hours of effort and he gets beat by 38 seconds.

There is lot of credit to spread around because it certainly was not all just me. I really needed the support and help from so many people. A very special thanks to my training partners Joe LaRue, Al Berlin, Maury Mckinney, Jacque Couture, the Milers, my swim coach Bill Baumuel, retailers Jason Pettengale of EMS, Tony Jerome from Peal-I-Zumi and all the business and people who generously and eagerly pledged donations to the **White Mountain Aquatic Foundation**, Badger Realty, Chick Lumber, Frechette Oil and Backhoe, Steve Frechette, Frechette Tire, Tricia Maddox Larson, Luoma Plumbing and Heating, M&M Assurance, and Pearl I Zumi. All my friends and family not to be forgotten either. It took all that help and encouragement from all those business and people to motivate me start that last run loop that eventually got me to the finish line, every bit of it. I could feel it all behind me the entire way, especially when I needed it the most. I am a fortunate person and very grateful to everyone. This was truly a Journey, a most wonderful and rewarding Journey. And also a biiiig thanks to my wife for putting up with this for an entire year. Look for me to be on the "Honey Do list" ASAP, ---- or out surfing----and her to be dusting off my trophy!

Jim

PS – Short memory - signed up for Louisville 2010, I'm hooked, still Seaman's fault.