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Issue 7 | Winter 2009

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Ironman Reflections Part I: Starting Out

BY DAVID GLOVER

As a triathlon coach and sub-nine hour Ironman-distance athlete, I hear these questions often:

- “How do I train for and race an Ironman?”
- “How can I go faster in an Ironman?”

With the completion of my 25th Ironman-distance triathlon at ChesapeakeMan this past year, I thought it might be interesting and helpful to anyone who has done an Ironman or is considering doing an Ironman to share the mistakes I made and the lessons I learned along the way. This article will address the first question. I will address the second in a future article.

Quick background.

I began running and strength training in high school and continued with both through college and into the Navy. I never swam competitively and rode a too-large road bike for recreation. I had several friends in college and in the Navy who were triathletes, but I was intimidated by

the sport. After being diagnosed and treated for cancer in 1995, I bought a \$600 Cannondale road bike and entered my first sprint-distance a few months later, as a way to prove to myself that I had beaten the cancer. I was instantly hooked, but an Ironman seemed impossible at the time.

With two years of training and racing sprint and international distance races, I let my next-door neighbor and training partner, Phil, convince me to sign up for Ironman Canada with him. Phil had done a now-defunct Ironman in New Hampshire several years before, so he had some experience with the training. We purchased and shared a 6-month Ironman training plan, and in March 2007, our training for Ironman Canada began.

That feeling of crossing the finish line for the first time is indescribable, other than to say that it was an incredible high that lasted for weeks. I wanted to relive that experience, so I signed up for the Great Floridian Triathlon two months later.

You need to put in the time.

There's no way around it. If you want to do well in a long-distance event, you have to do the long-distance training. At the time, I was newly married and working full-time, but I was able to commit the necessary 1-3 hours each day during the week, and longer blocks of time on weekends. If you don't like to do the long 4-6 hour bike rides, then Ironman training and racing may not be for you.

Seek out expert knowledge.

Training for an Ironman is a significant investment in time and energy. Following a structured training plan helped me reduce the anxiety of “What am I supposed to be doing?” Leveraging a credible knowledge source gave me the confidence to know that I was doing the right thing. I was also able to leverage the experience of my training partner, who taught me about things like bonking from not consuming enough calories, carrying multiple water bottles

for long rides to avoid unnecessary stops, and pacing over longer distances.

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You don't need a \$5,000 bike.

I competed in my first two Ironman races on my \$600 Cannondale road bike with cheap clip-on aerobars and regular, spoked wheels, while wearing separate outfits for each leg of the race. As I would continue to learn in future races, comfort is just as important as aerodynamics for longer events.

It's a long day. Pace conservatively.

After 112 miles of riding, I was happy to be off my bike, and because my strength at the time was running, I started running fast. I overheard a few comments from spectators like, "Slow it down," and "He's going too fast," but I ignored them because I felt good. I ran my first 10km with a big smile on my face, but after that, my smile slowly inverted as my pace drifted downward, and I went from the passer to the passee. In hindsight, it would have been better to start off conservatively and build speed later if I continued to feel good. Still, I crossed the line and became an Ironman. That feeling of crossing the finish line for the first time is

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incredible, other than to say that it was an incredible high that lasted for weeks. I wanted to relive that experience, so I signed up for the Great Floridian Triathlon two months later.

Find a compatible training partner(s).

I did not appreciate how much of a difference having a good training partner made until I began training for the Great Floridian by myself, as Phil was done with Ironman racing for the year. The long rides and run were lonely, and my motivation sagged, resulting in a time that was 30 minutes slower than at Ironman Canada.

Getting through the high's and low's

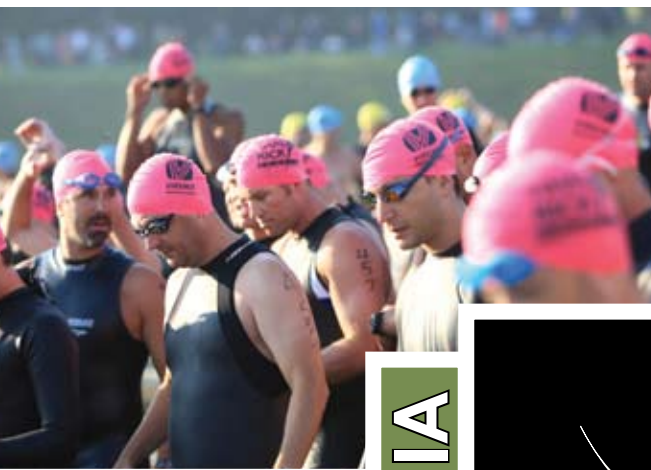
After the Great Floridian and the end of my triathlon season, I experienced post-Ironman depression for the first time – a feeling of sadness, increased anxiety, and aimlessness that persisted for several months. The days were shorter and colder, so I was not doing as much outside. I had no athletic goals to focus on for the remainder of the year. This seems to be normal for many Ironman-distance athletes

whom I've talked to over the years. I think the key to getting through it is to first understand that it's only temporary, and then to look for alternate activities outside of triathlon that give you purpose and direction.

With my first two Ironman-distance races under my belt, I set my eyes on a new goal for the following year: getting faster.

This article series will continue with Ironman Reflections Part II: Getting Faster. Be sure to check out the complete series of 25 Ironman Reflections articles that will be published on my blog at www.davidglover.net.

Author of Full Time & Sub-Nine: Fitting Iron Distance Training into Everyday Life, David dabbles extensively in endurance sports as an elite triathlete, coach, writer, and race director. He has helped hundreds of individuals through coaching, educational seminars, and eBooks. As an athlete, his accolades include an 8:51 Ironman PR, and being the 2007 inductee into the Vineman Hall of Fame. He is excited to announce She Does Tri camps for women in 2009 (www.sheadoestri.com). For more information about David, please visit: www.davidglover.net. For more information about his services, please visit: www.enduranceworks.net.



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