

## TO GOD BE THE GLORY

I'm not sure why, but for some reason I decided to sign up for an early season Ironman in 2006. Ironman Arizona was held in Tempe, Arizona, on April 9, 2006. One of the keys to Ironman success is lots of long bike training rides. Long bike rides and Minnesota winters don't mix well. But, I was treating the Tempe race as a training race for Lake Placid, so I wasn't too concerned going into the race under-trained.

As race day approached, several things started to complicate the picture. For one, my company decided to hold our annual meeting – in Pinehurst, North Carolina – on race weekend and into the following week. My attendance was mandatory, as I had to lead many of the meetings. Fortunately, I was able to push off my meetings until Monday, allowing me to race on Sunday, but it still meant finishing the Ironman at a decent hour so I could catch a plane to Charlotte, and drive to Pinehurst in time for my meetings. My plane departed from the Phoenix airport at 10:55 p.m., so I had to finish the Ironman in 14 hours or less in order to catch my plane. Typically, this shouldn't be a problem. However, as I've learned from past Ironmans, one never knows what race day will bring. The added stress of catching a plane immediately following my finish wasn't the best way to approach the race, but I had no other options.

Adding further emotional distress to the day was the tragic deaths of two of our senior boys from the local high school on March 23 and 24: Adam Mikelson and Jon Bonnema. Adam was a close personal friend and fellow athlete. He beat me in my first foot-race, the 2.8 mile Prinsburg fun run. Ever since that day, he became a very special friend. I was helping him train for another season of triathlons. He was one of the greatest kids you'll ever meet, but his life was taken at the young age of 18. He is greatly missed, and this race was dedicated to him. I had to finish the race, and finish strong, for Adam.

I was also raising funds for Hope Pregnancy Center in Willmar, as part of the Janus Charity Challenge. I had to finish the race to collect our \$6000 bonus for being the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest fundraiser in the competition. What started out as simply a training race ended up as a race with its share of pressure!

My plans for race day and beyond were as follows:

3:30 a.m. – Get up, eat breakfast, prepare mentally for the race  
4:30 a.m. – Drive over to the race site and head to transition area  
6:00 a.m. – Arrange for Heather to be picked up at the hotel by the Ulferts  
6:30 a.m. – Head down to the water  
6:45 a.m. – Be in the water for the swim  
7:00 a.m. – Swim start (yes, we had to tread water for 15 minutes)  
8:20 a.m. – Swim finish (1:20 minute swim planned)  
8:30 a.m. – Head out on 112 mile bike  
2:30 p.m. – Finish bike (hope to finish bike in 6 hours)  
2:40 p.m. – Head out for marathon  
6:40 p.m. – Finish marathon (hoping for 4-hour marathon max – should be 3:30 if good)  
7:30 p.m. – Bring bike to Tri-Bike Transport to have shipped back to Minnesota  
8:30 p.m. – Head back to hotel to pack up and go to the airport  
9:20 p.m. – Have Heather bring me to airport  
9:40 p.m. – Arrive at airport to catch 10:55 p.m. flight  
5:40 a.m. – Arrive in Charlotte  
6:00 a.m. – Get rental car and drive to Pinehurst  
9:00 a.m. – Arrive in Pinehurst, get to hotel, shower  
9:30 a.m. – Lead my first meeting

Needless to say, I had a big day planned!

The day started out well. I was a bit nervous about the heat. We left Minnesota with temperatures in the 30's, and arrived to upper 80's in Tempe. Race day temperatures were expected to reach 90

degrees. The mantra that was repeated by the pros and race directors leading up to the race was "Hydrate, Hydrate, Hydrate!!" Drinking was the key to success on a hot race day like this.

The swim went as expected. Dirty waters, cool temperatures (68 – 72 deg. F). I wanted to finish in 1:20. As I exited the water, the race clock read "1:20". Right on schedule. I felt very good coming out of the water – a nice, easy 2.4 mile swim. Now onto the bike!

My transition went fairly well and I was soon on the road, right on schedule at 8:30 a.m. The bike course consisted of 3 loops, each around 37.3 miles. It was relatively flat, making it a good course to stay in the aerobars and cruise. We had a bit of a wind from the East, in our faces on the way out, but at our back on the way in. It wasn't much of a factor, but one could feel it, especially by the 3<sup>rd</sup> lap. I felt great on the first lap, and drank lots of water and Gatorade, at the advice of the pros. I tried to drink at least 2 bottles each hour – one Gatorade and one water. I managed to average around 20.5 mph on the first 37-mile loop, and felt great. The second loop was nearly the same, but my stomach really started giving me troubles at around 45 miles. I was drinking a lot, but none of it was digesting. I soon had a stomach full of water and Gatorade, leaving me bloated and cramping. By Mile 60, I was unable to even look at my water bottle without wanting to throw up. I could no longer force myself to drink or eat. I thought of trying to throw up, but didn't want to lose all of my fluids. So, I just prayed that my stomach would start digesting. But, it wasn't happening. I battled through the next 52 miles with no food or fluids. Not a good thing for a hot ironman. I could feel my energy wasting away, and there was nothing I could do about it! Talk about frustrating! I felt like a car with an overflowing tank of fuel and a plugged fuel line so none of it was getting to the engine. By mile 85 I was burning fumes, wondering how I was going to finish a marathon after this. I remember thinking that this could be my first ever DNF (Did Not Finish), but I was determined not to let that happen.

I finished the bike leg in 5 hours 46 minutes, 14 minutes ahead of my goal, eclipsing my previous best Ironman bike split by 33 minutes. I averaged 19.5 mph for the 112 miles. However, what typically is my favorite part of the race – the run – was looking to be impossible. I'm usually excited to start the run after spending so many hours in the saddle of the bike. The run is where I shine. It's my strength of the race. However, I got into the change tent this time, put on my shorts and running shoes, and sat. I felt I couldn't even stand up, much less run a marathon. How was I going to finish this race, and especially cross the line in time to catch my plane?!! I was discouraged. I took extra time in the tent to gather myself, and try to prepare myself for the battle that lay ahead. I prayed for a miracle in my stomach, which was still totally bloated and cramped. I felt like I had the flu. I had nothing left.

I ran the first mile in under 8 minutes. Typically, I'd like to average 8-minute miles for the first half of the marathon, but I knew that wouldn't be the case today. By mile 3, I was wasted. I needed something drastic. I needed a miracle. My engineering brain kept trying to figure out how to fix the situation at hand. I knew I needed my stomach to digest to get the fuel to where it needed to go (my muscles), and I knew I needed to take in more fluids. I hadn't drank or eaten anything since mile 60 on the bike. In order for the stomach to digest, it needs blood flow. However, during intense activities, your blood is flowing to your muscles and extremities. I remembered reading that slowing down and allowing your heart rate to slow would allow blood to flow back to the stomach and aide in the digestion process. So I slowed down. WAY down. In fact, I stopped on the side of the course, and forced myself to lay down for 15 minutes, which I timed on my watch. I filled my shirt and hat with ice and lay there, closing my eyes, letting everyone go by. I spent the next 15 minutes praying for a miracle. After 15 minutes had elapsed, I managed to drag myself up and start running again. I ran the next 2 miles at around a 9:30 pace or so, but it was still a struggle. One foot in front of the other. Force myself to the finish line. Stomach still bloated, still praying for a miracle. Nothing. After mile 13, I decided to repeat the procedure of mile 3: Lay down, ice up, close eyes, pray for stomach to cooperate. After 15 minutes, I got up and tried to run. Still nothing. My frustration was mounting, and my first DNF was becoming a reality. If I had 17 hours to finish, I could do it. But I had to catch a flight. I wanted to be done by at least 8:30 at the latest. It was now after 5:00 and things weren't looking good. The first half of the marathon took 2.5 hours, and I was slowing down.

I had to finish. For me. For Hope Pregnancy Center. And for Adam.

Between mile markers 13 and 14, I passed by Heather. I told her to throw away all my time goals and pray for me just to finish. I still hadn't eaten or drank anything for the past 6 hours. It was 90 degrees and I was dehydrated. I had no salt intake, which was certain to lead to severe leg cramping. Nothing was working. I needed a miracle.

Then, on mile marker 14, that's just what I got. In literally an instant, like the flip of a switch, I felt my stomach start digesting! It was growling! I felt somewhat hungry. In a matter of seconds, I had energy in my legs. It felt like a complete transformation. I have never experienced anything like that in my life. I went from utter despair and no hope, to optimism and hope! I went by an aid station and the water actually looked good! I took a sip, and started to run. I clipped off a 10:00 mile, and felt great. I continued with a couple 9-minute miles on the next. Still slow by my standards, but nonetheless running. I can't tell you how great it felt to run! I went by Heather at around Mile 20 and had a big smile on my face. I said, "I don't know what happened, but it is night and day! I feel great!!" By mile 22, my legs started cramping (I had taken no sodium for the past 7 hours), so I was forced to slow down a bit and stretch. After that, I started running again. I continued running. I ran a final mile at a sub-7-minute pace for Adam, my fastest of the entire marathon, crossing the finish line in 12:28! I went from a sure DNF to a sub-13 hour Ironman.

I spent an hour in the medical tent, taking in chicken broth to keep my legs from cramping. My support crew, consisting of Heather, Roger and Linda Ulferts, and Linda Mikelson's brother, Paul, were Godsenders for me, helping gather all of my gear, get my bike to the transport service, changing bike wheels, getting transition bags, etc. I am indebted to them!!! Thank you!! We left the race at 10:00 p.m., got to our hotel by 10:10, threw my gear together, and headed out the door. Heather drove to the airport and dropped me off at 10:25. I checked in and caught my flight, upgrading to first class in the process! I arrived in Charlotte, NC, still dehydrated and salt-caked from sweat, at 5:40 a.m., got my rental car, and drove to Pinehurst resort. I arrived at 9:00 a.m., showered and changed, and was leading my first meeting at 9:30. What a day.

But the story doesn't stop quite there. What really happened out on that course? How was I able to transform my run from a DNF to a sub-7 minute 26<sup>th</sup> mile? What happened? Well, it turns out that when I passed Heather at Mile 13, she and the Ulferts called Pastor Steve at our church in Minnesota. It was around 5:00 p.m. Arizona time (7:00 p.m. in Minnesota), the same time when many small groups were meeting from the church. Steve activated the prayer chain, letting them know I was having troubles on the run, and was severely dehydrated and cramped. By 7:20 p.m. Minnesota time, there were literally dozens of people in prayer for me. Also, at that same exact time, BOTH my mom and my grandmother had a bad feeling about the race, and started to pray intensely for me. My transformation occurred at mile 14 at – you guessed it – precisely 5:20 p.m. Arizona time, or 7:20 p.m. in Minnesota! Coincidence? You think what you want, but I KNOW the answer.

So, why did God not answer *my* prayers? Why did it require a body of believers coming together in prayer before the miracle occurred? To be honest, I don't know. Perhaps it was to teach me a lesson on the power of corporate prayer. Or perhaps God knew that I needed to get SO low and so far beyond myself before I would truly realize that it was HIM, not me, that allowed me to finish that race. I don't know. What I do know is this: God performed a very real transformation to this skeptical, logic-minded engineer on mile 14 of a brutal marathon. I may not understand why, I may not understand how, but I do understand, in a whole new way, the power of our awesome God. When he touches us, our lives are changed. When He touched me, my life changed. Have you been touched by your Creator? It is my prayer that everyone may one day experience what I experienced out on that course: A miraculous touch from the hand of your Creator.

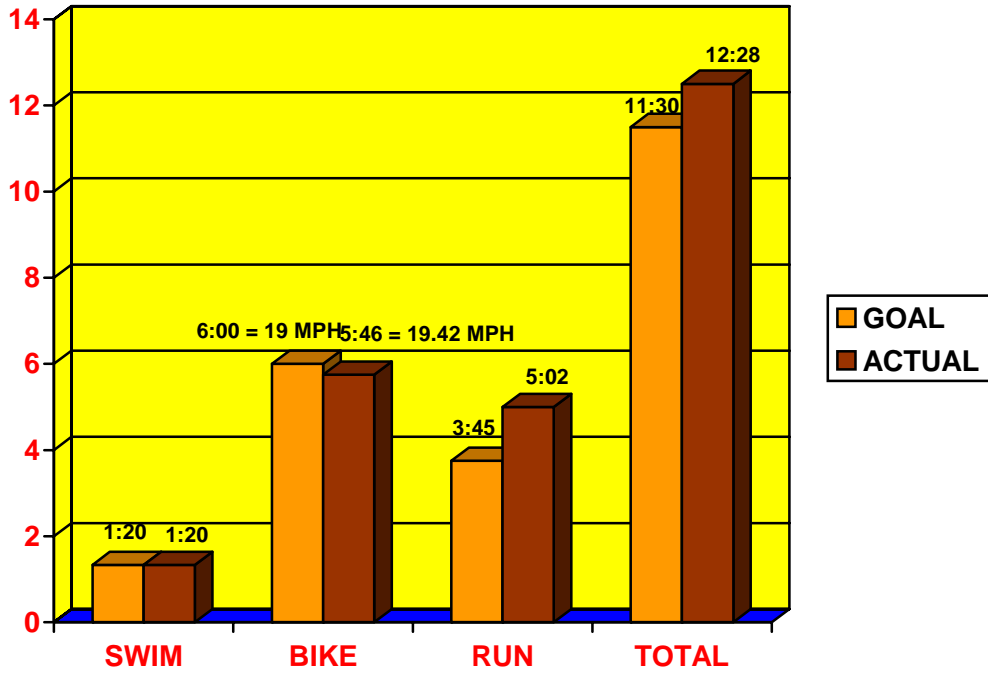
Thank you, God. It is clear that it is by *YOUR* strength and *YOUR* power that I accomplish anything. I give YOU all the glory.

<sup>20</sup>Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup>to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.  
- Eph. 3:20-21, NIV, emphasis mine



←The look on my face says it all!





### IRONMAN ARIZONA RUN SPLITS BY MILE

Failure to maintain adequate hydration, electrolyte and blood sugar levels all can contribute to gut shutdown, which can lead to dehydration, electrolyte depletion and bonking. Thus, a vicious cycle develops, and this has ruined triathlons for many individuals. The gastrointestinal tract is highly dependent on normal hydration, electrolyte (especially sodium and potassium) and glucose levels for optimal function. Falling hydration, electrolyte and glucose levels only increase the risk of gut shutdown. Once in this state, it is difficult, if not impossible, to digest and absorb necessary fluid and nutrients to fuel your performance

