

Balanced Hydration – by Coach Daren

In the business world it is said that a company fails due to mistakes made in the year before the doors actually close - not in the year the failure is actually recorded. This axiom also holds true for triathlons especially for long course races like half and full iron distance events. OK, so in triathlons the mistakes are often made in the days before the race, and not in the years before like in business, but you get the picture.

I began writing this article a few weeks ago, and then put it aside until after White Lake Half Iron. Sometimes I tend to sound a bit like a preacher lecturing to athletes about the evils of not being hydrated, of improper equipment selection, and of poor nutrition. So I waited until after I'd read about twenty race reports from novices heifers, novices on the White Lake course, or from veterans with many White Lake half's under their belt.

It amazes me each year that one theme prevails in these reports - dehydration and the related ailments like cramping. After reading each report, I asked the athlete a few questions. Most were aimed at what they ate and drank in the days prior to White Lake. Almost all replied with, Coach - no worries, I was WELL hydrated, and drank lots of water in the two days before especially the afternoon and night before the race. I just can't figure out what went wrong, and why I needed an IV after the race, and why, two days later, I still feel bad.

I think we all agree that you need to be hydrated before any race. But, hydration needs to be BALANCED hydration. What's balanced hydration? Let's assume that at any given time a normal athlete has water in their body and some amount of electrolytes like potassium, calcium, and sodium. Let's further assume that over time, and without undue stress on their bodies, some natural balance will exist between the percentages of these electrolytes in the retained water. If the athlete upsets this balance things start to unravel. We see this in athletes who consume way too much water and no electrolytes on the run course (salty sweat goes out, and plain water comes in) and thus dilute their natural electrolyte balance.

But Coach, I took two Enduralytes per hour on the bike, and one Lava Salts per hour on the run. Great, but that did little to fix the electrolyte imbalance you created in the 48 hour period before the race ever started! I agree that staying hydrated before a race is mission critical. Just make sure that you are not diluting your electrolyte balance by taking in just water. Personally I like Gatorade Endurance Formula mixed to 2/3 normal strength (two scoops per tall water bottle). I walk around sipping this the entire day before a race. I'm known for going to the movies the afternoon before an Ironman; this gets my mind off the race, and allows me to relax in the air conditioning. I always eat popcorn with salt! The calories won't kill me, and the salt works wonders.

As with anything we do in racing - be sure to try balanced hydration before long training rides and runs. Always follow the cardinal rule - don't do anything on race day that you haven't already done in training. You have, just like a business owner, invested money and lots of sweat into any race. Ensure that your race day does not go out of business because you failed to practice balanced hydration the days before the race.

If you have questions or comments, please email me, and let's talk about it.

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