

## Duke Liver Center Half – Race Report – Craig Lindemann September 14, 2008

*“Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” – ‘Iron’ Mike Tyson*

I had a plan. It was a fairly simple plan, centered on a fairly simple goal: complete my first half-iron distance event in under 5 hours. I chose a race, and developed a training plan, a taper plan, a nutrition plan, and a race-tactic plan in preparation for the race. Then I got punched in the face...

I originally signed up for the famously flat and fast Patriot’s Half Iron event thinking that it gave me a very good chance to meet my 5 hour goal, and an outside shot (maybe just a glimmer of a dream) at a podium placing in my age group if I brought my ‘A’ race. In the weeks leading up to the race I had been feeling great in the water, biking and running incredibly well and felt extremely confident. Everything was going perfectly to plan. Unfortunately, on race morning, Tropical Storm Hanna brought her ‘A’ race, so mine had to be cancelled.

Time to adapt the plan. The Duke Liver Center Half was the following weekend and still had spots available. Thanks to my wonderful friends in Cary, I had a place to stay and even a few friends to race with. My flat and fast course would be replaced with a hilly and notoriously difficult course that typically draws a fantastic elite field. “No worries” I thought, “I prefer a hilly bike course to flat, and I’ve been running plenty of hills in training.” My age-group podium dreams would likely have to be put on hold, but 5 hours was still a realistic goal. Weather forecasts in the week before the event were calling for an overcast day, with temps in the low 80s and a slight chance of rain. In other words: perfect race conditions. A 30 minute swim, 2:50 bike, and 1:40 run would put me right where I needed to be.

Fast forward to the day of the event. My perfect race day had been replaced by a hot and humid 95 deg scorcher. History has taught me that my body does not perform well in these conditions, but as long as I stuck with my nutrition plan I would give myself a great chance at success.

On to the race. The swim was fantastic – water temperature was perfect and there was no chop or current to speak of. Wetsuits were illegal, but I had my brand new Blue Seventy PointZero3 swim skin ready to go. I planned to go fairly easy on the swim and conserve energy. I knew that a good swim for me was a great swim by normal triathlon standards so there was no need to kill myself to gain a few extra minutes. The extra energy would be valuable later in the day. I exited the water in 33 minutes. A little slower than I had planned, but feeling great! I was through T1 smoothly and off on the bike without a hitch.

On my bike I had 3 gels, my aero bottle full of water, and 2 saddle mounted bottle with Accelerade. The plan was to take the gels with water at miles 14, 28, and 45, and drink my two saddle mounted bottles through out the course, to maintain a steady flow of

calories and electrolytes during the bike. The bike started off great; 25 miles in I was averaging 21mph (well ahead of my goal pace) and was feeling effortless and steady. Coming through a shady section at mile 26 I hit a huge pothole square and hard, and immediately started assessing damage, assuming I must have pinch flatted, and maybe damaged my rim. I rode on, and was shocked that everything seemed to have survived. Two miles later, at the top of a climb into Harnett County, a second pothole was followed by the worst sound in the world: my full bottle of Accelerade ejecting, and accelerating down the hill I had just conquered. “Oh *expletive!*” I quickly assessed the race and decided not to chase down the bottle and re-climb the hill. As I reached for my other bottle of Accelerade, which was about half-full, I was shocked to find that it was also missing, probably having ejected on the first pothole. “Double *expletive!!*” My brilliant plan of nutrition had instantly become a dangerous war of attrition. I had two water bottle handoffs at miles 36 and 47, and one gel, which would have to get me the rest of the way to the run.

I continued on, and felt surprisingly strong. I noticed that I stopped sweating around mile 50, which was a sign of things to come, and for the last few miles of the bike dialed my effort level back a notch, and tried to spin out, stretch a little, and prep for the run. I came into T2 with a 2:45 bike split that put me in perfect position to go for five hours – I only needed to run a 1:40 half marathon.

As I stepped off my bike and my foot landed at the dismount line, my left quad cramped and provided what would be the first in a series of lessons on hyponatremia. The run course didn't have mile markers posted, so everything here is the best guesstimate of what was a very delusional mind. After about two miles of quad cramping agony, my legs finally relaxed. It was only a momentary relief, however, as about 30 seconds and a few stumbling strides later I realized that my quads stopped cramping because my legs were no longer firing. They were quitting on me, so I was forced to walk on, and 5 hours quickly became a pipe dream. I took an ice cold towel, water, and HEED at every aid station and trudged along, jogging for short stretches when I could before the stumbling sloppy feet returned. At about mile 4, as I started walking an uphill section, I started seeing spots in my vision and couldn't walk straight. This was my darkest moment, and for a split second 6 hours was gone, finishing was gone, and my only thought was, “I need to get to the next aid station before I pass out.” As soon as that thought entered my head, I knew I had to get it out. I hate to admit that what entered my head as I forced the negativity out was the theme song from “Walk Hard.”

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lOW2ljpM-4>). So with little choice, I walked...hard.

At the next aid station, I grabbed a handful of potato chips and a cup of cola. This is definitely the first time, and may be the last time I get to make this statement, but...potato chips and cola were my salvation. Cola and Heed. Cola and Heed. Cola and Heed. Walk and jog. Walk and jog. The first lap took about 1:12 according to my watch and I was on pace for 5:50, but I was (surprisingly) starting to come around. 30 second jogs had become 1 minute, and 1 minute jogs were becoming 3 minute runs. I started running down the hills again, then running downhills and flats, then half way up hills, then aid

station to aid station. I started passing quite a few of the folks who had passed me earlier. With (best guess) 3 miles left, I looked at my watch and realized that somehow I had come back and, 5:30 was still possible. It was mostly downhill, and even though I didn't feel great, I felt the best I had through the entire run. At the last two aid stations, I ignored the food, grabbed an ice cold towel and kept going. Everything hurt, but I wanted 5:30. I came down the last steep hill and turned onto the quarter mile run in to the finish with just under 2 minutes to give. I emptied every reserve of energy I had and ran to the finish, entering the chute, I saw 5:37:47 and counting. (My wave started at 8:00.) I tried to lengthen my stride and pushed it out, crossing at 5:30:00.

It wasn't the sub-5:00 goal I had set for myself, but under the circumstances it was the best race I could've possibly done. At a personal level, I've never been lower physically, mentally, or emotionally than I was four miles into the run, and I was able to dig out and salvage a personal victory, however small. Looking around during the run, you would've thought the course was a war zone. At any moment, about 75% of the athletes on the course would be walking, mostly looking like zombies. After the race, every athlete I talked to, from Half-Iron rookies, to seasoned M-dot veterans and Kona-qualifying Elites had the same thing to say: "That was absolutely the hardest race I've ever done. Hands down." Some days, just surviving is an accomplishment, and for that I couldn't be more proud.

I finished the race, and more than that, I felt my best at the very end after clawing myself out of a very deep hole. I know I can finish this distance, and I am more confident than ever that I can race and perform at a high level at this distance. If I could do it all again, I'd go back and get that water bottle at mile 28, but I don't question the snap decision I made during the race. You race, you get punched in the mouth, and you respond. You learn, and you live to fight another day. Of course, next time I'll be sure to have some e-caps stashed away just in case.

Congratulations to everyone who finished on a tremendously difficult day for racing, and thanks to all the volunteers and friends and family who came out to support us!



# Triathlon