

## **Coeur d'Alene (CDA) Ironman Triathlon**

**(2.4 mi swim/112 mi bike/26.2 mi run)**

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**By Amy Buhrle**

After finishing a big race, it seems to be tradition to write a "race report" summarizing the athlete's experiences, a review of the race itself and an overall lessons-learned synopsis. This makes it easy to share with supportive family and friends what the journey was like... Maybe you're curious about this IM business... or maybe you're considering one yourself... or maybe you're still confused about why I did it?? Well, this may or may not help, but here's my journey.

### **The Decision**

June 2006 - I jumped online to register for my first Ironman (IM) race. For those who have not heard... you pretty much have to sign up one year in advance. With only 8 IM races in North America, each capped at about 2200 participants, these races fill up fast; some in a matter of hours. I felt like I was trying to get tickets to the hottest rock concert around (and paying way too much for them)!

### **Why?**

The simple answer is peer pressure (you'd think one would grow out of that at some point?). I have been gradually working my way up to this point, having done triathlons on and off for about 12 years. But the past 3 years began a more steady march... one year a ½ IM relay, the next my first ½ IM, the next 2 ½ IMs. Seeing this progress, my friend Rebecca suggested I sign up w/ her for the 2006 IM in Florida. Mentally I couldn't get my head around that and declined... but I went to FL to watch her race and the seed was planted. Undeterred, she again suggested I sign up w/ her for the 2007 IM in CDA. Count me in! There's just something about setting a goal, bigger than you've ever accomplished, and seeing if you can hit it. Add to that goal something that involves making your mind and body stronger, working hard alongside friends doing the same, and traveling to a really cool place... I ended up being an easy sell.

### **The Training**

Officially, my training plan started January 1, 2007 – a 6 month plan, pieced together from training plans offered to me by other IM friends. While it turned out that many triathletes from the Raleigh area registered for IM CDA too – over 20 of us – many had coaches that designed custom training plans for them. Considering my goal of just finishing (vs. actually being competitive), I was hopeful that if I followed a plan my friend Rebecca used for her first IM in Brazil a couple of years back (with great success), maybe I would be ok too? So began the real work...

Many have asked how many hours a week I trained... It varied, as I cycled through "build" weeks and "recover" weeks... anywhere from 5 hours to 20 hours... lots of early morning swims, lunchtime runs and evening bike rides. And always, going "long" on the weekends. But the best part of training was my training partners. Thanks goodness for Dennis' infamous Run-Swim-Runs at Jordan Lake (including our reward of the hot tub, home brew and a hot meal afterwards!), the Cycling Spoken Here regulars and all the great group rides, and my Umstead running buddies. While travel and crazy schedules required some solo workouts, I always looked forward to training with others - supportive, educational and just plain fun!

Soon, early June rolls around and it's time to start tapering. Ready or not, all the hard work is done and now it's time to rest my body for the Big Day. Being a newbie, my biggest question was: How will I be able to put all three legs together, back-to-back, in one day? Yes, I knew I could do each of the 3 race distances separately. And yes, I had done "brick" workouts (combo workouts, such as long bike ride followed by short run, or short bike, followed by long run). But still! I was exhausted after doing my 100+ mile training rides and still could not imagine jumping off the bike and running a marathon?? I followed the training plan but couldn't see how it was all going to come together. One veteran IM friend simply said, "Just trust the taper". I decided to rest as best I could, take the leap of faith and go on the assumption that somehow, I'd finish.

Surprises about the training:

- I underestimated the time management skills required to train, work and have some kind of outside life. It's amazing how much time adds up, mixing countless gallons of Gatorade, washing water bottles, showering multiple times a day, packing gear, unpacking gear, doing more laundry, driving to/fro for training rides, etc. etc. It all adds up. And it's just me! How many of my friends did it – with FT jobs and kids – I'll never understand.

- I was ravenous during my taper. I had no idea I could eat so much! It was usually a struggle for me to eat enough, and at the right times, during my training. But since I know my appetite is suppressed by exercise, I suppose it should not have been a surprise that once I backed off the training, my appetite caught up (and seemingly made up ground) for all the calories burned. But wow.

## **The Venue**

I had never heard of Coeur d'Alene, let alone been there, but had heard scary things about the very cold lake and the very hilly bike course and the potentially very hot run. What was I thinking??

Let me just say – CDA is beautiful! Located in northern Idaho, close to Spokane, WA and the Canadian border, the scenery provided a wonderful, pleasant distraction. Mountains in the background, clear blue water, and during race week (and race day), very kind, cool temperatures – all situated near a cute, walkable downtown. I can't imagine a better venue for a race.

Travel-wise, we arrived on Tuesday night in Spokane and drove into CDA on Wednesday. This gave us 4 days before the race to do all the pre-race stuff – adjusting to the time change, registering, scoping the course and TAs, doing short rides/swims/runs and just getting the lay of the land. While we could have done this in less time, it would have been more stressful. And that's the last thing you need before an IM.

## **The Race**

Surprisingly, I did not get too nervous until I found myself standing on the beach at 6:55 am on Race Day, facing a cold, angry lake, with precious few minutes of stillness left in the day. No turning back now...

### **Swim (2.4 miles)**

But then – a possible reprieve! Due to the cold water temperature (64 degrees) and the rough conditions (lots of wind chop), the Race Director made a very unusual announcement: racers could opt out of the swim and instead do a Duathlon – just the bike and run. How tempting!!

Especially for someone who knows darn well this is her weakest leg, and who really, really, *really* does not like being cold. But I didn't really consider it. I had worked too hard to show up on race day and not actually attempt a full IM. So after lots of hugs to fellow racers (Rebecca and Carl) and loyal cheerleaders (Rebecca's parents, Mark and Marty) and a quick prayer, into the water I went.

Strategy #1 in the Swim: Wait until everyone else goes into the water first.

That was the easy part. A small canon went off to start the race, and while 2100+ neoprene-clad bodies rushed the water, I strolled down the beach, taking my time. Then came the breathtaking shock of cold water, slowly creeping into my wetsuit. Brrr! Soon I hit the traffic jam with hundreds of other swimmers. I *knew* I wasn't swimming fast enough to catch anyone! After some treading of water, I realized several people around me were trying to get the surfer/lifeguards' attention – several people wanted to be pulled out of the water – and several people were treading water like me, trying to make sense of the mayhem. Head down and onto the next buoy!

Strategy #2 in the Swim (and rest of race): Distract myself by singing different songs.

My excellent IM Sherpa (Marty), who's also an excellent musician, was assigned to give me songs to sing along the course. Anytime he saw me, he had to shout out a new song, to refresh my mental play list. Dutifully, he tells me right before the race: Your song for the swim is "Bridge over Troubled Water". Very appropriate – calm melody to get me through this swim. Got it.

It took me at least a mile of swimming to realize I was singing the wrong song to myself... Oh, this is really "Smoke on the Water (and fire in the sky)"! Whoops, let me try the "Bridge" song... Then I sang the "Bridge" lyrics to the "Smoke" melody. I'll blame the cold water for disabling that very small musical area of my brain. But whatever, it got me through the swim and I'm off to the Transition Area. One leg of the race (and my least favorite) down – now the fun can begin!

## **Bike (112 miles)**

I loved the bike course – such a good variety of terrain! Some flat and fast sections, some great hill climbing and descents, beautiful scenery and good spectator support along the way all made for my favorite part of the course. Being such a slow swimmer, I usually have fun catching people on the bike. I passed people on both the climbs (using my granny gear!) and the descents (not using my brakes!), and thought how grateful I was for all the mountain rides I'd done in California and more recently in NC. Whoo Hoo!

I didn't see too many of my fellow NC racers... Daren and Lisa at points along the way... but did see our faithful sherpas a few times with signs and cameras and lots of cheering!

Unfortunately, zipping by on a bike did not leave much time for Marty to shout out my next song, so I winged it with "Sunshine on my Shoulders" (thanks mom for the John Denver-infused childhood) and anything else w/ "sun" in the lyrics, which did the trick. I just had to remember to ease up and keep my pace moderate, so I'd have something left for the run. I came in just under 7 hours, which was my goal.

Another fun part of the bike (and run) legs in an IM – the "Special Needs" bag. We are given a plastic bag to fill with whatever we want – extra food, drink, clothing, etc. – and we get it at the half way mark. So while I had been doing pretty well at eating regularly on the bike (Cliff Shot

blocks, Enduralytes and lots of Gatorade), I thoroughly enjoyed getting off my bike, eating my PB&J sandwich, stretching a bit, taking a nature break, and shedding the arm warmers. In a long day, that was five minutes very well spent! Then back on the bike. The second lap was a little slower, but overall I felt good coming into T2.

## Run (26.2 miles)

Back into the transition tent for another complete change into comfortable running clothes. Such great volunteers in those tents! As I head out towards the run course, I realize my race number pin popped off and the bib was dandling off my fuel belt... 26 miles of that would drive me crazy. So back into the tent I go for another safety pin. Out again, and eager volunteers with plastic gloves offered to smear sunscreen on me... well that was fun! Now off to the run, but no! I still have my biking gloves on. So I turn around AGAIN and dump my gloves in the tent. I could have dumped them in a trash can along the course, but all I could think of is getting an “abandonment of equipment” penalty and my fuzzy logic comes up with another trip back to the tent as the wise course of action. Go figure.

Once on the run course, the first few miles were comfortable – a slow pace but comfortable. But then began the frequent stops at the port-a-potties (brand name was “honey buckets”, which, in a fatigued state, provided endless amusement). In retrospect, it is clear to me that I was over-hydrated – drinking more than normal before and during the race, in conditions drier and cooler than I was accustomed – and yet I continued to drink. And stop for nature breaks. This really became ridiculous – I must have stopped every other mile – spending at least a ½ half hour of the run, not exactly running. I was just so darn paranoid of muscle cramping, which I had experienced on the run in every previous long course triathlon I had done, that I was determined to head it off by staying hydrated. So while I tried to slow down on drinking at the aid stations, the damage was done, so to speak. Maybe I drank more of that lake water than I realized?

So I shuffled along in between aid stations and potty breaks, at a slower and slower pace. But I kept shuffling... until about mile 19, when right knee pain flared sharply. I hadn't felt pain like that in any of my training, although I did have chronic bursitis in that knee from too many years of soccer. I guess after 13+ hours of work, my knee was revolting. So I walked / shuffled for about five miles, until the pain finally subsided. The highlight of that low point in the run was Dennis. We crossed paths at about mile 19 for me (he was ahead, on his way back), when he came up to me and gave me a big HUG! Wow, that was the boost I needed. He said, “You're going to make it! You're going to be an Ironman!” And it dawned on me – he's right!!

Other perks of the run:

- Hand-written signs from fans, staked into the grass along the course. This was fun, speed-reading the hundreds of signs, looking for the ones made by our own NC spectators. Thanks Mark and Marty -- How fun! (Several other signs were entertaining too... such as the one that said “Honey, I'm pregnant!”... With no other names on the sign, I wondered how many runners did a double-take?)
- More song assignments. On the second loop, Marty called out my run song: “Born to Run!” Of course, my musically malfunctioning brain translated that into “Born to be Wild”. Close... kinda.
- Seeing my friends along the course – Nasrin, Brett, Daren, Dennis, Rebecca, Susan, Lisa, Carl, John, and Scott (I must have missed the others while visiting a “honey bucket”).

How appropriate, that I saw the majority of my friends in the last, and most difficult, part of the race. Just when we all needed to hear that extra “good job!” from a familiar face.

- Neon green, glow-in-the-dark bands to wear after dark, so we could see each other as we wound our way through the neighborhoods at miles 24-25. Cool!

## The Finish

But finally, I headed back into town. I knew I was much slower than I had predicted on the run – over an hour slower – and I felt bad about my friends waiting around for so long at the finish line, not to mention the family and friends trying to stay up to watch us finish over the web (as it was past 1:00 am on East Coast time). Something about being close to the end allowed me to pick up the pace a bit. People lined both sides of the street, screaming my name (which was on my number bib) -- bright lights, pounding music, a finish lane w/ tons of cheering fans and the announcer proclaiming, “Amy (hesitant pause) Burl from Cary, North Carolina – You Are an Ironman!” After 15 hours and 21 minutes, I was done. Mission accomplished!

As excited as I was to finish (and wobble off to hot pizza and a massage)... We still had one friend out on the course. With the deadline of the race quickly approaching (midnight), we were getting anxious. But the most thrilling part of the day was... with just 5 minutes until midnight... seeing her come into sight!! There’s Lisa, with a big smile on her face, earning her Ironman status for the first time too. A perfect ending to a great day.

Many, many thanks to everyone who supported me along the way – training partners, friends, family (both local and out of town) and of course my own Ironman Sherpa ☺

Will I do this again, you ask? That’s an easy one – no (time soon)!



# Triathlon