

Mental Focus for Ironman

By Rich Strauss

After my Kona race, a client asked me about the mental focus required for a successful race.

I went through Marine Corps Officer Candidate School in January through March, 1996. It was the coldest winter in 100 years. For one exercise we had to negotiate a very long obstacle course, which included the Quigley, a small creek, covered in ice. The instructors had us break the ice with the butts of our M-16's just so we could get in the water. For the exercise, I was the leader of a four man fire team. The other three guys were very thin runner types and they were absolutely suffering in the cold water. The instructor yelled at them and said "I didn't put you in that water, you did. You asked for this. You have asked for the privilege of leading me and my Marines. You earn it in that water. Suck it up, Buttercup."

The body will do amazing things, when driven by the single-minded focus created through clarity of purpose. In short, identify why you want to do this to yourself and then commit your head to driving your body to the edge of your physical envelope. In the words of Jack Palance in City Slickers, it's the **One Thing**.

Consider:

- Successful swim pacing is largely a matter of choosing to be realistic and humble. Maintain your perspective on such a long day, swallow your pride and just relax on the swim.
- Likewise, bike pacing is very much within your control. There is a wealth of information out there about how to pace the Ironman bike. For a smart, disciplined rider, it is then a matter of executing that advice.

The One Thing

The run is where the rubber meets the road. Let's consider the entire Ironman starting field and the likelihood of these athletes running to their full potential on race day. A percentage will be eliminated due to improper training. The classic example is training for a marathon, not a 26.2 mile run after a 112 mile bike ride. Another percentage will be eliminated by nutritional and pacing mistakes that begin to express themselves either late in the bike, or mid way through the run.

So when we reach T2, we have a small subset of the entire field that has created the opportunity for a successful run through the skillful manipulation of many variables: training, physical fitness, nutrition and pacing. Of this subset, what then determines who runs to their potential and who does not? The One Thing.

First, a successful Ironman run = slowing down as little as possible. Not slowing down is almost entirely a function of maintaining focus, not fitness. If you are not cramping up on the run, you don't need to be running very fast to have a successful marathon, by Ironman standards. Despite what you might think, the difference between a good and bad marathon time is just continuing to move forward, as best you can, for the entire 26.2 miles. Sorry, but that's about as sexy as it gets out there.

You MUST expect your body to have a conversation with your head at some point during the run:

Body to Mind: "Ok, I'm truly suffering here. I can keep going, but you need to give me a very good reason to continue suffering like this."

Mind to Body: "We suffer because of the One Thing. The pain won't last forever. Just keep doing the best you can do and we'll get there."

My One Thing

The One Thing is whatever has motivated you to do this to yourself in the first place. Before the race you need to take a long, hard look in the mirror and identify what your One Thing is. And this is no time for bullshit. Be completely honest because your body will play your bluff when the chips are down. You can't lie to yourself out there.

After four Ironman finishes, I have identified my One Thing as very concrete goals, time or place based.

- **Ironman Florida, '00:** I came off the bike with a shot at going sub 11 hours for my first IM. I used this goal to maintain complete focus on my run and had a successful day, despite donating blood 18 days before the race and to this day not remembering miles 13 through 22. One Thing = sub 11:00, determined in T2.
- **Ironman California, '01:** 30-34 AG qualifying time in 2000 was 10:20. I wanted to qualify but wasn't completely committed to it. At about mile 10 of the run I had seen many 30-34 calves pass me and knew I wasn't going to qualify. I began to lose my focus and ran into some nutritional issues by mile 22. Picked myself up and finished in...10:19. Just below the qualifying standard but a year too late :-). One Thing = Kona, but I wasn't completely honest with myself. After that goal become unrealistic, I should have set an alternate objective of sub 10:10, as a tool to maintain my focus.
- **Ironman Wisconsin, '02:** Not confident in my run fitness and expecting a dogfight with Pedder. However, I came off the bike 15th overall, with a very good chance of qualifying or even standing on the AG podium. Maintained complete focus and ran 3:45 on about 3:30 marathon fitness. One Thing = Kona and AG podium, determined in T2.
- **Ironman Hawaii, '03:** Injury and first time on the island combine to set my goal at having a successful race. One Thing = no execution errors. Without a concrete, quantifiable goal I struggled to maintain my focus and failed to do so, relative to my performances at Florida and Wisconsin. I was a machine on those days, but not in Kona. My One Thing became pain and the desire to make it stop. I had a strong last 5 miles, considering.

Your One Thing

My One Thing may or may not be yours. I know what mine is now and will plan my race goals around it to increase my potential for a successful race.

How do you determine your One Thing?

- Identify why you want to do the race before signing up. Are you doing it for you or to prove something to someone else? Be completely honest with yourself. "I'm doing this Ironman so I can earn a unique title that is mine forever." One Thing = title of Ironman.
- Take that One Thing and mate it with your race goals and expectations: "The title is important to me, not the time. I want to finish with a smile on my face."
- Remind yourself, daily, of your One Thing and the race goals and expectations you have built around it. Through this process your One Thing will provide clarity of purpose to your training. When the Phunometer is pegged during a 6 hour long ride, you'll know why you are still out there.
- In your mental rehearsals before the race, visualize the conversation between Mind and Body when the Body begins to question the Mind's commitment to the One Thing. Prepare your rebuttal beforehand.
- On race day, continually remind yourself of the One Thing. Focus completely on its accomplishment. Remember, you can never disappoint your friends or family. They will be proud of you regardless. However, you can let yourself down. In the end, the best we can do is follow our commitment to our One Thing.

Time or performance based One Things

This is double edged sword, creating intense focus on the run, but potentially setting you up for major swim and bike pacing mistakes. Here is what I do:

- Before the race, I set very broad finishing time goals. This is usually a simple exercise in curiosity, as I do the math on projected splits, based on current training paces. I don't plan to use these numbers in any way during the race.
- On the swim and bike, I focus completely on smart execution. I let the time take care of itself. I do my best to completely ignore the races of those around me, especially on the bike. I realize I create the conditions for a successful run hours before I step off the bike in T2. Whenever I feel myself about to get stupid, I remind myself of this fact.
- When I step off the bike, I look at the clock, assess how I feel, and absolutely commit to a run time and resultant finishing time.
- I then put that goal in my back pocket. I won't need it until much later. In the meantime I again focus completely on proper execution.
- At some point during the run, I know the gears will shift from "running" to "not slowing down." This is when I take the time goal out of my pocket and go to work. However, since I am usually incapable of simple arithmetic at this point, this will take the form of running to Mr. Gatorade, walking while I drink, and then starting to run before I have a chance to talk myself into walking more. In the end, the time still takes care of itself as I focus on not slowing down.

Never underestimate the body's ability to go farther than you ever thought possible. However, the body is a machine. Your mind is the driver. Prepare your mind now to drive your body on race day.



Triathlon