

Finding the Limits – a White Lake Half Race Report - by Todd Spain

The 2008 White Lake Half Ironman was not the best moment in my lengthy 2+ year Triathlon career. But, sometimes we have to remember why we do this. I think I realized that part of the reason why I race is to test and discover my limits. If so, I bumped up against several walls of my physical limit last Saturday.

Frankly, I came to White Lake this year without the kind of respect that a half Ironman deserves. This is a long race and requires solid training, planning and mental preparation. I raced the Riverwood sprint the weekend before at 90% or so and felt really good, but I didn't begin to really mentally prepare until a few days before the big day.

With little sleep the two nights before and too much last minute preparation, I didn't feel my normal "ok, I can relax now" period where I know that all is ready and squared away.

Like most athletes, on race morning I had to hike to the transition area from parking. I brought in my bags and went to set up transition about an hour before the race. I carefully taped two gels to my bars and loaded more, along with a bar and a tube of Enduralytes into my bento box.

Unfortunately, I had forgotten my helmet and had to rush back to the car to retrieve it. Thankfully, I have my own timing chip and had just body marking to complete before starting. (Note to self...bring own marker to races and do my own marking)

I have raced enough now that pre-race jitters are fairly mild. Zipping up the suit, I realized that I had also forgotten sun screen and borrowed some from a nice couple who barely spoke English. A friend slopped some on my shoulders and my forehead which now goes much higher than it used to.

The swim warm up ritual went normally. I had a swim plan and felt ready to go. The start was much more "rugged" than last year with lots more jostling and bumping than I recall. It felt more like the start to an Ironman swim for the first 200 meters or so.

At around 300 meters my right calf cramped hard and would not let go. I have no idea what caused this, but it stayed with me for the rest of the day. Perhaps someone hit me – I just don't know. At about 400 meters my left cramped as well. I honestly thought I was going to have to quit and hung on to a surfboard for a minute or so and tried to work it out.

Setting off again, I made it about another 200 meters and had to stop. This was not the start to the "goal" swim time that I had in mind. The cramps let up a fraction at 500 meters or so and I settled into a labored rhythm and did not stop again. I completely let my legs dangle and simply forced the remainder of the swim. The squiggly man did not appear soon enough for my liking.

I had to stop twice up the ladder and let the legs relax in order to push hard enough to climb up. Running up the dock to T1 they felt ok, but not great.

For the second time in four races, T1 was to a bit of a shock to realize that my bike had fallen or been knocked over. Despite the worry, I had a solid transition and rolled out. In the first few miles I did my usual situational assessment to realize that my aero bottle containing water with electrolytes was empty. Missing from my bento box was my bar, 2 gels and worst of all my Enduralytes. I had a down tube bottle with water and electrolytes mix to carry me to the first water stop and 3 gels for the bike.

Thereafter, I would take in only the electrolytes and calories of a few gels. I had planned to take 3 or 4 Enduralytes per hour and a gel every 35 minutes (five total).

The bike course was much windier than last year; however, I immediately set a solid rhythm and actually felt great. My calves hurt and/or cramped with every revolution, but this was definitely manageable.

I really wanted to take about 5-7 minutes off of my time from last year. My run has improved to the point where I felt I needed to "save" less. Through mile 35 or so I was ahead of schedule. I passed many 40+ racers who had killed me in the swim.

About mile 40 my stomach quit allowing me to take in gels. I knew I was starting to be in real trouble. The last 15 miles seemed to take forever. I was slowing down, not taking in any more electrolytes and just a bit of water was possible. I had a killer headache, dry mouth and my stomach was not at all happy; however, my legs had quit cramping.

Frankly, I hit T2 and was simply pissed. I knew I was in big trouble and seriously considered pulling out. Friend's encouragement convinced me to stick it out and I also imagined that conversation with my kids and so decided to press on as far as I could. (I have said to them a hundred times that it only hurts for a bit, but quitting lasts forever)

At about mile 3 on the run, I thought I might just be able to finish. I felt terrible, but it seemed doable. I remembered Beke's comments in Kona about honoring all participants by finishing, despite having to walk it in. I was fairly sure I could do that. I was dreading posting a terrible time, but that is far better than a DNF to me.

The counter-point was that I was really going deep. I knew I was seriously dehydrated and very low on electrolytes. My stomach had completely shut down. I also considered the damage that I knew I was inflicting on my body – that it may take days or weeks to fully recover and I wanted race again at the end of May.

I ran-walked mile four and five. Mile six was completely walked. At the turn-around I saw Nasrin on the side of the road. It took me several seconds to focus to recognize her as she yelled for me. I told her that I was "completely shattered"...and I was.

I walked another 400 meters or so toward the finishing area...passing the "lap two" turn. It was no longer an overt decision. I was done. When I reached the first volunteer I told that "I need medical". She quickly realized that she had to help me get there and I leaned on her. At some point along the way – and I truly don't remember seeing her here, Suzy Nisbet helped haul me in. I apparently passed many others whom I didn't recognize and I apologize for that.

The medical crew was amazing. They had me lying down on a cot with an IV dripping within a few minutes. Chills followed, but the nausea quickly subsided after the IV and emptying my stomach a few times.

At about 1.5 hours, the orthostatic blood pressure test indicated that the IV bag had done its job. So I crawled off to lie in the grass for the next 3 hours or so.

Avoiding the graphics in between, let's just say that nothing stayed down and I wasn't getting any better. So, I headed back to medical. They threatened to haul me to the hospital right on the spot,

but I asked them for another IV bag first. They reluctantly agreed. The second bag really helped a lot and I felt much better almost immediately.

The next two hours were spent napping in my car. After a somewhat greasy dinner (not sure why this sounded good) and a decent night's sleep, I awoke Sunday feeling much better.

It occurs to me that what we do training each day is to retrain our brains to forget pain and to push on regardless. I am very proud of my determination to keep moving forward. It was, and still is, very painful for me to quit without finishing. Clearly, I couldn't go on, but this will haunt me until next year when I get to race at White Lake again – and I WILL race it again.

I have absolutely seen the limit. I have arrived at the goal.



Triathlon