

Triing

A Journey of discovery, challenges, and camaraderie while racing in 50 states and the continents beyond

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To my family and teammates.

A note about content

This book is an account of my experience as a competitor in triathlons from 1986 to 2016 and events before, during, and after that influenced my life's attitudes and choices. For the purpose of the book's content, all races will be referred to by the name identified to them on their websites, as shown in published results, or other promotional materials. IRONMAN® and 70.3®, and their respective logos, are registered trademarks of World Triathlon Corporation in the United States and other countries. This independent publication has not been authorized, endorsed, sponsored or licensed by, nor has content been reviewed or otherwise approved by, World Triathlon Corporation (WTC), d/b/a/ The IRONMAN Group.

Utah #12 *One and Not Done*

June 8, 2002

IRONMAN Utah

Provo

A full-distance triathlon—2.4 miles of swimming, 112 miles of cycling, and 26.2 miles of running—is an all-day affair. Some people may think a day spent racing at this distance is like a lost day in one’s life. Others dabble—“I want,” “I wish,” “I hope,” “I could,” “I will someday,” “I may.” Others simply decide, “No way in hell.” For me, “Complete a full-distance triathlon” was on my checklist. In 2002, I decided to check that box. I approached this as a commitment: I would be in Utah to finish my first IRONMAN. Here is how I tried to do that on race day.

The first challenge was answering the question, do I do this? “Do I” questions repeatedly arise in life, and they challenge us. Do I: Stay at the Olympic distance or go long? Train for the mileage needed for a full-distance triathlon or not? Stay single, marry, or divorce? Have kids or not? Take a promotion? Change jobs? Move to a different city or stay in place? Answering the questions means making choices and commitments, some of which are difficult. Of course, choices shape who we are, what we do, where we live, and how we live our lives. My advice is: choose things that matter. Deciding to do something—anything—is the first step in the right direction. Do not stop with the easy satisfaction of merely thinking about a decision. Analyze and choose, then move forward to achieve the goals. Thinking is not attaining; there must be real action for an actual outcome. Commitment to the target is vital.

My decision was, in a way, connected to Americans’ commitment to life that changed in September 2001. We watched the historic tragedy unfold before our eyes on the morning of the 11th. Hayes pointed at the television and simply asked, “Why?” We stood beside her in silence, dumbfounded, and with no answer.

Five days after the devastating events of 9-11, a few hundred triathletes, still in an emotional daze, gathered for the Thunderbird Triathlon in Phoenix. The pre-race buzz was notably subdued. We talked more about the tragic events than the pending morning race. People there felt proud to be living in American, appalled at being attacked, grateful for life, and blessed to live in a free country. We struggled with the rightness of competing while the country was still in mourning. While we dressed to race, the intensity was unusually somber. Our camaraderie led to a social gathering of unity instead of determining who the best triathletes in Arizona were for the day.

After the race, Wade Grow mentioned plans to compete in his fifth IRONMAN, a new one in Provo, Utah. I met Wade the previous fall at a St.

Joseph, Missouri race. He frequently placed high in the overall category at triathlons. Wade convinced me to sign up for IRONMAN Utah.

IRONMAN races, at least the participation and promotion, are a classic example of a market-creating innovation. Their marketers created races for people that did not know they needed or even knew they were missing. Personnel created the supply, added hints of exclusivity and elitism, and global competitors ignited demand. Participants advertised for the races by sporting the M Dot branded logo on their skin in the form of tattoos. A self-awarded, eternally fading finishers' badge of honor displayed on muscle-toned, shaved legs, whether woman or man. Though the Utah race was still eight-plus months away, new triathlons often sold out within days. So when the race entry opened up, I sat at the computer, pulled out a credit card, and keypunched in a commitment to triathlon training in all my spare time until June.

In any sport, genes help performance, naturally. But thinking and learning are also necessary for success. My peer group, competitors, triathlon articles, and race experience taught me how to prepare for the long event. Moreover, I better evaluated the probabilities of optimal training content, especially after the debacle at Lake Perris. I adopted a training cycle of ramping up no more than 10% week over week for three weeks, followed by a recovery period of seven days in week four. Tracking metrics ensured compliance. I accepted that randomness could determine how I placed depending on who showed up, the weather that day, and how well others had prepped for race day. I questioned my biased assumptions for pre-race excuses and reframed them as doable.

I discovered that the thinking and learning applied to racing also applied to my professional and family life. I avoided jeopardizing our family's future for selfish, personal desires related to the race. I questioned the paradigms of our kids' conditions and chose not to accept what others implied could not be learned passively. Instead, we influenced how they optimized their emotional maturity, skills, and worldly knowledge to excel beyond early expectations.

Neither before nor since this race did I devote so much mental energy to an upcoming triathlon. From signup to race day, it occupied my mind. Thought about the commitment when pushing the confirm button on the race entry. Thought about its time requirement while at work, falling asleep, waking up in the morning, training, and strangely when watching our kids' dance recitals. Even when I was not thinking about my first IRONMAN, thought I should be thinking about it. Every day the race stole comfort time from the psyche. Can I swim 2.4 miles non-stop? Will the legs hold up for 112 miles of cycling with a mountain pass climb in a dry climate at altitude? If still moving after these two segments, will my mind and two legs last to complete a 26.2-mile run?

On bad days, the brain taunted me with the race's distance. The swim was nearly equivalent to a lap around the Indianapolis 500 Motor Speedway. The

bike leg was almost the same as riding across Florida from a Gulf of Mexico beach in Naples to an Atlantic Ocean beach in Fort Lauderdale. And the run would extend across the Great Salt Lake in Utah. All seemingly impossible feats for mere mortals to accomplish—like running on water. My body had barely survived half these distances in California when I was four years younger. Will the same body that struggles for a week after doing only a marathon be able to survive a marathon immediately preceded by a swim and bike prelude, either of which alone would filter out all but the strong? How much pain will this race place on a body, and at how much of a personal cost with a benefit of what? A finisher's medal, t-shirt, and eternal bragging rights of "Yeah, I did that. See the checked-off box on my Bucket List and the cool M Dot tattoo on my calf?"

A self-induced fear of an unknown outcome consumed more time than training. But the thinking and learning helped: I embraced the desire to be a long-distance triathlete and conquered the fear of not finishing. The battle of fear and pain waged against a trio of allies: accomplishment, earning race status, and enjoying a three-month feeding frenzy during training. A mantra aided pre-race survival, "I am choosing to be a competitor instead of a spectator." I chose to compete in a full-distance triathlon, not a wish, a want, or a could have.

After a few weeks of training, I am tired, losing weight, and my stomach hurts. I expelled nasty farts. I am dehydrated. This IRONMAN event thing was difficult, and I am not even at the race site yet. Symptoms stayed on for three weeks, then four, and more. Meanwhile, I went on a ski and training trip near Salt Lake City two weeks after the Olympics left town. Mother nature calls caused me to stop at the same convenience store mid-run each morning.

On the flight home, we flew over Utah Lake in Provo. I scoped out the landscape and visualized its layout for the mental preparation phase of race readiness. Nothing too scary from the air, except the ice-covered lake. Its surface looked as smooth as glass. My conclusion was the water would be cold, the bike ride long, and the run course not equipped with enough porta-potties, or worse, enough toilet paper.

With no improvement in physical symptoms, I returned to the doctor and tested positive for Giardia, an infection caused by a microscopic parasite often found in unsafe drinking water like backcountry camping areas. A few weeks earlier, Hayes, Caroline, and I camped at such a site on Mt. Lemmon north of Tucson—a favorite triathlete training location in the winter. We enjoyed tasty camp meals, hunted for snipe, and I ran leg and lung-burning workouts with the Burley at 7,000 feet elevation.

With the diagnosis came a three-week supply of antibiotics that cured me. So despite fretting about a lack of training time to reach the starting line, I'm energized.

To minimize race concerns, I analogized triathlon goals to the goals of a college course: A syllabus is to a passing grade as a training plan is to complete a full-distance triathlon. Training for the race equated to taking a 400-level college class in a student's stated major. Students go to class, study, gain knowledge, sit for exams along the way at mid-terms and then pass the final. For a full-distance triathlon, participants work out, practice new skills, gain conditioning, perform test sets along the way, compete in races, and cross the finish line. In the winter, an unsolicited syllabus arrived in the mail disguised as *Triathlete Magazine's* Special Edition, "The Road to Kona." An article, "13 Weeks to a 13-Hour IRONMAN" by Gale Bernhardt, served as the training plan on the run-up to race day.

Training and racing require a personal commitment, support from a spouse or significant other (SIGO), interaction with workout partners, and experience gained from shorter races—and I used all of them to gain an advantage. Fully resolved to the race, I poured energy into continuing a strong relationship with Chris and staying attuned to her interests. The kids signed on as workout partners. They rode in the Burley wagon and that provided efficient multi-tasking as I leveraged time to train, parent, and socialize. This tactic kept me employed, married, and an involved dad.

Mapping out life in the 1980s, I envisioned training runs and bike rides with my future kids when they reached their late teens/early 20s. However, reality set in when we understood the girls' situation. During workouts, I often wondered what they envisioned doing with their dad in another ten years.

Interim races provided status checks for full-distance readiness. In March, for instance, at the season opener race in Tucson, a veteran triathlete asked how I was holding up with the 50+ mile weekend bike rides. "Don't know, riding at most 25 miles in a workout." His subtle headshake meant, "*dude, you're going to hurt and not be an IRONMAN.*" I read his face and felt inadequate but unshaken—the 13-week workout schedule verified I was on track for a 13-Hour finishing time.

Swim training progressed as planned, about two miles per workout, three days a week. Bike mileage increased on a set schedule. I commuted to work on the bike that included bonus climbs in Papago Park. On Sundays in April, I cycled around the Gila River Indian Reservation. I pedaled seven miles east through the Ahwatukee neighborhood, the self-proclaimed "largest cul-de-sac in the world," and rode around and to the top of South Mountain in Phoenix. On the first ride, I unexpectedly merged with a large group of riders who had started from a local bike shop. The ride started at a leisurely tempo pace with conversation throughout the peloton.

I was a newbie and did not know anyone in the pack. Riders formed four different groups. I started with Group 1 and lasted 30 seconds in a full-out sprint

before being dropped. Behind them came the fast-approaching Group 2. With seconds to recover from the earlier ill-fated ride, Group 2 swallowed me up and spat me out the back. Then I tucked in behind the slowest rider in Group 3, only to be dropped in less than 30 seconds. Next came the final group of cyclists. I merged with that pack, held my line, drafted behind the last wheel, and focused on keeping pace until all groups reconvened 20+ miles later. On subsequent rides with the group, I joined Group 4 and pulled for a fair share of the trips.

These group rides increased my speed, endurance, and climbing strength. Also, I created a tradition at the apex of the ascent of eating snack pack size peanut butter and cheese-flavored crackers, a trio sensation of salty, sweet, and crunch. The vastness of the area stretched out beneath us as we enjoyed a 360-degree panorama view. The angular Sierra Estrella Mountain range to the west, the reddish-colored Camelback Mountain and the darker Squaw Peak to the north, the Superstition Mountains to the east, and my house on 1st Street and beyond across the reservation in the southern quadrant.

Running workouts on Saturdays consisted of part strength and part endurance training. I pushed the Burley with Hayes or Caroline rotating in as a training partner. Most runs with the girls finished within six miles. Once dropped off, I departed solo for the workouts' endurance component.

I inserted some racing during reduced mileage recovery weeks. At Lake Las Vegas Triathlon, I talked with George Esahak-Gage, a multi-podium triathlete winner, tri coach, and an all-distance tri competitor from Phoenix. Shared with him on the warm-down run, "I'm so far into new territory on racing in an IRONMAN, I'm not sure how to approach the swim." He scared me into thinking about swimming more in workouts. So in late April, I added a fourth weekly swim workout, either Tuesday or Thursday depending on work flexibility. This increased swim yardage by a third. I focused on stroke efficiency to minimize overuse injuries from swimming three days in a row.

Biking distance increased too, which added to my endurance by stress-loading the leg muscles. On May 3rd, I cycled for two hours from home toward Payson. Chris and the girls followed in the sag van. They swept me up, and we headed toward the Mogollon Rim for a weekend of camping and high-altitude training. Did a 4-hour brick workout Saturday morning in the Apache Sitgreaves National Forest. On Sunday morning, I mounted the bike and headed home. Reached 42 mph coming down the highway from the Rim's edge, then rode at a snail pace of 7 mph on a multi-mile ascent toward Fountain Hills, at the northeast side of the Phoenix metro area. I averaged a reasonable pace in the low 20s mph on a relatively flat ride to the house through the depths of Ahwatukee's cul-de-sac.

The biggest challenge came in Scottsdale when Chris and the girls handed off cold Gatorade and water. Caroline's norm was for me to pull over, pack up

the bike, and hop in the van when Chris caught up. This time instead of jumping in, I jumped back on the bike, and Chris drove home, leaving me as the trailing spouse. Once Caroline realized I was left behind, she screamed, kicked, and experienced a full-throttle meltdown. Just another challenge in raising AHC kids before we learned to prep them for expectations before unordinary events. As parents, we tried to learn from them as much as we expected our kids to learn from us. Chris served as our common thread to provide support through growing times.

This weekend's workouts tortured the legs. Finally, after a 112-mile bike ride from the morning's campsite, I shuffled into the house. Chris and Caroline served me a Baja Fresh burrito upon arrival. Not sure which felt better, a belly full of Mexican food or lying on the cold tile floor falling asleep from exhaustion. What did not feel better? Knowing I faced the same 112-mile distance ride on race day, followed by an entire marathon run. The weekend marked my training peak. I welcomed the coming taper period.

Two weeks later, I experienced the worst training day of my life, a day I didn't feel like running because I lost a great friend, my dog Woody. Woody was a mutt with an Australian Cattle Dog (Blue Healer) frame, a lot of smarts, and a bit of hound dog. He had lovely merle markings with raccoon-like ringed eyes like a heavy 360 degree circle of black eyeliner. Chris and I picked him out at an animal shelter line-up in Kansas City on Halloween morning two months after we married in 1987.

Woody loved to run. Once fully grown at 65 pounds, he was a stocky and a strong runner. The dog ran 30-35 miles a week with me. He raced in some 5K and 10K road races in Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, and Washington State over the years. He finished as the top dog in his races.

After we moved to Phoenix, his interest and ability to run began to wane. He slowed due to age and the desert heat. We still enjoyed our workouts together, but he aged quicker than his will. A month before the race, 10-12 neighborhood kids played in the driveway as parents watched from the sides, waiting for the school bus to arrive. We were waiting until everyone left to drive Woody to the vet one final time. Ultimately, word slipped out, and the six-year-old twins who lived across the street shouted, "Woody is going to heaven." The twins' dad walked over and asked if we were putting him down. All I could do was look ahead and nod slightly for fear of losing my composure and cry. Then, one by one, the kids came over and gave the handsome, proud, 14 ½-year-old dog a big hug on his last day on Earth. We should all leave this place with such a great send-off. My thoughts of Woody supplanted all thoughts of the upcoming race. Went to work and shut the door for the day. I did not feel like running. That was the worst day of training.

I arrived in Provo not looking the part of a typical triathlete. Instead, I wore a pair of black Nike baseball flats, black cotton shorts, and a black Ocean Pacific Hawaiian print shirt covered with tiny white palm trees. I checked in, weighed in, and met my roommate, Wade Grow, at the race expo on the Brigham Young University (BYU) campus.

The Wasatch Mountains towered over the town to the east with a vegetated, green-colored base giving way to a rocky gray above the tree line capped with bright white snow under azure blue skies. Utah Lake provided an oasis of water in contrast to the nearby starkness created by the departure of ancient Lake Bonneville. A mix of hot and cold, lush and dry, intertwined with my mindset of confidence and nervous anticipation of the unknown race outcome. I focused on the race components instead of fearing possible outcomes. The best action to conquer fear is to face it head-on to eliminate it. However, the next two days needed to pass to resolve this race goal as I expected the race to be the most challenging sporting event in my life. During the 48-hour countdown, I am scared shitless. Looked at other entrants' faces and postures and sensed different people's confidence levels, anxiety thoughts, and unnatural fear factors. Steven C. Hayes, a professor of psychology at the University of Nevada-Reno, summed up the countdown period best: "Most people are struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings. But the show we put on for others says, 'I've got it handled.'" The reality is "there's a big difference between what's on the outside and what's on the inside." It seems other racers in Provo, from first-time wannabes to experienced pros, were scared shitless too.

People may assume that the event lasts only a day, but I learned these stretch over at least four days for the athletes and more for the workers, volunteers, and exhibitors. Two days out from race day, the organization hosted an impressive dinner for over 2,000 athletes, family members, friends, and other support personnel. Grow arranged with friends to share a table for first-timers and experienced full-distance racers.

Mike Reilly, the voice of IRONMAN triathlon and race announcer, served as the banquet's Master of Ceremonies. He talked to the diners like a head waiter. He ensured we received cold drinks, plates loaded with hot food, and motivational speeches. He also discussed logistics to set our expectations for the race: what to do when, when to be at the pre-race mandatory meeting, how to catch the buses to the race start, where the race started, and where it finished. He mentioned highly ranked professional and age-grouper triathletes scheduled to race. He provided entertainment too.

Reilly shared personal stories of competitors' courage in overcoming unique obstacles for the race. For example, he talked with the wife of one competitor who informed her husband on stage that she too was entered in Saturday's race. She described how she had trained unnoticed after the husband

had left for work, gone to bed, or trained independently. Oh yeah, she was a mother of their young kids too. Talk about motivation and commitment. Moreover, he seemed overly focused on his goals and didn't realize that his wife would dilute her support team role as one of his competitors. I would have been as clueless had Chris entered the race, trained, and made the trip without me seeing any signs of a potential second racer in the family.

Mike also shared advice on one thing I struggled to figure out, how to carry enough food to get through the day. During training rides over 30 miles and runs over 10 miles, I brought workout food specially created and packaged calories for triathletes: goo, gels, shots, bars, drinks, fruit, and more. But I was not interested in carrying a triathlete's pantry on race day only to get it drenched in sweat, covered with salt, and heated by my body before eating. Mike said, "The race is a catered affair." This beat the heck out of the banana stuck in a Speedo tactic that led to disaster at half the distance. I just needed to trust them not to run out of food or water. His comment worked. I raced with my mind at ease about food supplies.

On race day minus one, woke up, stretched, and went for a planned 3-mile jog to reduce my pre-race anxiety level. However, 2 ½ miles into the loop, a lengthy fence blocked access to continue. So I backtracked and incited an over-trained, anxiety-fed, 5-mile workout. The legs felt tired. This situation earned head billing on an excuse list of not finishing the race, but more followed.

I assembled the bike after breakfast. I created and identified more issues than solutions. I applied too much torque and sheared off the seat post bolt. This pulled the seat down to the top tube, six inches lower than needed. Pumped up the tires and blew out an inner tube. The excuse list grew in sync with the bad omen list. Wade provided a peer-to-peer solution for the tire. He showed off his CO₂ cartridge with a special adapter that filled a tire in five seconds. We headed to a bike store for a new bolt, tubes, CO₂ cartridges, and an adapter—all in stock there but the bolt. A queasy stomach feeling crept into my mid-section.

We visited the Expo's bike repair booth. A mechanic pulled out an Allen wrench, unscrewed the sheared-off bolt, spun around, and threw it into the trash bin some ten feet away with a blind toss. The on-site mechanic returned with a used bolt that... Fit! At least I will reach the starting line. With the bike functioning, I shared one more thing with Wade for our bikes.

A set of white labels with the day's action words to coach us through the bike leg: "Eat," "Drink," "Breathe," "Relax," "Laugh," and "Palm Trees Ahead." We stuck the labels on our bike's aero bars, reminders for the next day's race. The single words indicated tactics to follow for a stellar race. And "Palm Trees Ahead" fed our motivational goal to be KONA qualifiers.

We racked our bikes in T1, located four miles outside of town at Utah Lake. Race buoys, bright orange inflated pyramids anchored to the lake floor, marked

the gigantic rectangular swim course. Never before did 2.4 miles look so far as when marked on open water. Surveyors outside of my hometown had plotted the county roads in one-mile grids. Running alongside a cornfield at age 14 from crossroad to crossroad looked like a long way to run. Now I was envisioning a lot of cornrows to swim around. The race's first on-site challenge required the mental acceptance that I could and would swim 2.4 miles in open water. Sunny skies and light winds suggested good weather for the race. The lake's surface looked flat, but the stomach churned.

I lay in bed, thinking of tomorrow's race. My imagination featured me with a steady swim, an efficient bike, followed by a fast run. However, I also experienced atychiphobia, commonly known as the fear of failure. Some athletes never think anything tragic will happen to them. That bad things happen only to others. At times, they may think they are indestructible. Others imagine and experience competition phobias, not stuff that will kill or maim them, necessarily, but the kind of thoughts that can prevent them from well-earned race performances. People can get so obsessed with potential bad outcomes they fail to acknowledge the positives of being prepared for a race. They visualize catastrophes instead of successes. They go to extremes to think of disastrous consequences, to the point of exaggerating potential worst effects in terms of all-or-nothing results instead of reaching our objectives.

I've experienced both extremes. And now, on the other side of them, I have concluded that both unbridled optimism and logic-based anxiety are necessary for proper balance. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who led a nation through World War II and the Great Depression, said, "Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear. The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today." His leadership translates into sports coaching too.

Potential triathlete fears: water—aquaphobia, bikes—cyclophobia, running—no word for "fear of running," however, potamophobia is the fear of running water. Perhaps apt for a triathlon. There is no specific word for "fear of the next day's competition," but there are plenty of symptoms:

- inability to sleep
- stomach pains
- hyperactive bowels
- nausea
- shaking/trembling
- sweating excessively
- dizziness
- hyperventilation
- dry mouth

- losing control over emotions
- fear of dying
- anxiety attacks
- incoherent speaking and thinking

As expected, I did not sleep well. Did not suffer from somniphobia (fear of sleeping) or from not sleeping (should be insomniphopia). No, I suffered from (and this is a bit of an understatement) anxiety, self-inflicted and over-inflated. Negative thoughts included flat tires combined with the inability to fix them, being crashed into by others, and equipment malfunctions such as sheared bolts, broken chains, or bent derailleur. I feared most of all not being able to finish. My comfort zone was running for 800 meters in a track meet.

Race day started at 4:30am with a promise to myself: "I am choosing to be a competitor instead of a spectator. This is what I am doing today." Much better to race instead of reading the results at home 625 miles away where Chris and the girls, my favorite support group, stayed rooting for me.

Wade and I picked up another competitor walking toward the buses to reach the race staging area. Paying it forward, thinking ahead that someone would return the gesture at a future race. Upon arrival, each of us parted our separate ways, as the swimmers would do in two short hours.

We then dropped off the bike-to-run transition bags at T2. After the bike ride, racers would grab the T2 bag to switch from bike wear to running gear. Next, racers boarded a bus to Utah Lake. We carried a wetsuit, goggles, swim cap, race chip, and the swim-to-bike T1 bag. It contained bike shoes, shorts, a jersey, helmet, sunglasses, peanut butter and cheese crackers, and enough gels to feed me beyond the bag re-fill zone in case I missed every single handoff from the volunteers. I still had a trust issue with the wholely-catered affair advice.

I sat on the bus with a queasy stomach among peers and fears. Wondered if I would achieve the day's goals. To cope, remembered a passage in *The Right Stuff* by Tom Wolfe, where he wrote about original Mercury astronaut Gus Grissom flying combat missions. Pilots who North Koreans had not shot at had to stand during the bus ride between barracks and the fighter jets. Grissom ensured he earned the right to sit after his first sortie, saying, "The main thing was not to be left behind."

While I did not have to stand on the bus, I did not want to be left behind by my peer group. Throughout life, I willed my way to develop advanced skillsets to belong in my chosen peer groups. On race day, I wanted to belong to the full-distance peer group. I focused on a challenging day as a competitor instead of a spectator. The competence, knowledge, experience, and abilities revealed themselves in unfamiliar circumstances and transformed me to stretch my capabilities as a spouse, parent, triathlete, and runner. I didn't seek or avoid the

various challenges. Instead, I embraced them with the motivation to be the best I could be, as I did not want to be left behind in what I needed to excel in my responsibilities. At IU track, the presence of Cary Hardwick, Jim Spivey, and Jim Welte forced me to boost my running speed and hone racing tactics—or be cut from the team. Their informal coaching resulted in inclusion, while their enduring friendship more than offset the pain they inflicted on me in workouts.

It took more than my collective know-how not to be left behind in Provo as we faced firsthand what a difference a day makes. Yesterday's calm water now raged into three to four feet high waves that slammed the jetty rocks and shoreline. Breakers swept across the pier. A howling wind blew across the water with gusts up to 40 mph. Whitecaps popped over the continuous churn of the lake. A helicopter hovered, adding to the cacophony of sounds. The combination of loud noises, stinging sand picked up by the wind blasting away at exposed skin, and fear on athletes' faces skyrocketed my anxiety level. It unnerved all triathletes but the bravest and the clueless.

At 6:45am, eager competitors followed the officials' directions. They entered the lake and positioned themselves for an on-time start. Other racers, including me, waited to avoid burning precious energy required deep into the race. To prevent the staging congestion on the pier, I stepped off and followed a handful of competitors who entered the shallow water from the rocks on the pier's right-hand side. I walked by a stressed-out competitor who struggled with an uncooperative zipper on his wetsuit. He yelled angrily at his partner who could not zip the wetsuit shut either. He shouted so loudly anyone nearby could hear him over all the sounds of nature surrounding the lake. No matter what the woman did, the zipper did not close. And worse of all, he never offered a solution to fix the problem. I wonder if they stayed linked up after race day.

Though scared of being tossed around in the water, I acted like a lemming and followed others into the lake to swim. Well, at least try to swim. The cannon shot boomed at 6:55am. Chaos ensued. The race started five minutes earlier than planned. All the other noises overwhelmed the cannon shot. It sounded more like a muffled boulder that flipped from the current in Class IV whitewater rapids. Many competitors never heard the cannon because they jumped the gun. Either a group of swimmers already in the water started the race on their own, or competitors entered the water, bobbed, and stroked out toward an undefined starting line that caused a critical mass reaction that resulted in the race start. Disorder reigned over an hour across Utah Lake's rough surface for almost 1,550 triathletes.

Once in the water, the lemming peer-group disappeared. Three of us swam up the wall of a wave. When the wall washed out, it disbursed us in different directions. The water belly-slammed us indiscriminately into the flattening wave and flung me into the next wave's trough that rolled toward a new mix of

swimmers. I stroked and felt the body's upper half pulled into the oncoming wave. Imagine Garfield the Cat with arms and legs spread, plastered to a big wave's wall of water only to slide down and repeatedly be pounded by subsequent waves. That is what it felt like. Dove into a wave and kicked like crazy to avoid that feeling of being temporarily stuck on the wall of the wave, yet this made no difference. I worried the legs would tire before reaching the bike course. Other waves temporarily pinned swimmers underwater, pushed them forward on a body surfing adventure, or flooded gaping mouths with water instead of intended air. Sometimes only a head, arm, or the top portion of a torso popped out of a wave.

I could not see anything other than waves and swimmers moving in all directions. I swam in the direction of where a turn buoy was in my mental map of the course. The wind blew the floats from their temporary anchored spots that marked the turns. We could not see them anyway because the high waves blocked our sightlines and sighting points. Postrace police reports stated waves reached five feet in height. I swam for over 40 minutes until a volunteer in a boat pointed at us to turnaround. Until then, I saw no one on surfboards, in kayaks, nor any boats that commonly herd wayward swimmers back on course. I accepted her direction and swam around the boat.

The lake seemed smoother with the wind pushing the water behind us. It rolled more than churned. I relaxed into a steady breathing pattern of every right arm recovery and sighted forward every tenth stroke. Finally, after another 30 minutes of swimming, I reached land.

Former swimmers crawled, climbed, or sat on the rocks on the jetty's left bank. Others walked with no sense of urgency to minimize their transition times. I was surprised no one ran through the transition. Racers looked like zombies, as if suffering from shock, as they walked or shuffled onshore. I never expected triathletes to move through T1 at a pedestrian pace. Rationalized racers transitioned this way after a rough and long swim with at least another 7 to 16 hours of racing to go.

I was wrong. The race was "on hold." Looked at the watch, I had swum for an hour and ten minutes in "heavy seas" without standing or holding on to anything. That tough swim attested I could handle the swim leg. The effort created the confidence needed for the future. Back on shore, we asked, "Now what?"

As directed, each racer crossed the timing mat located 200 meters from the bannered transition area entrance. Race officials wanted to account for all participants who entered the lake. A few hundred of us, pushed by the current, over swam our intended exit point by 400 meters. As racers assembled in the transition area, word spread that at least one competitor drowned. We picked up our T1 swim-to-bike transition bags and hung out for updates.

The reality that someone died jolted our senses. Two and half hours after the race started, less than a handful of unclaimed transition bags remained scattered between the swim exit and bikes. Everyone waited. The unclaimed bags were a worrisome sight. We wanted their owners to step forward. Word spread that three people had drowned, equaling the number of bags remaining on the ground under the T1's entrance banner. The race day confusion cleared Sunday morning when reading the paper. Race personnel pulled John Boland, a 55-year-old seasoned triathlete from California, from the water 20 minutes after the race started. Resuscitation efforts performed on a rescue boat failed—cause of death identified as drowning. More information came from others. Two unclaimed bags lingering in T1 belonged to racers who dropped their bags but decided the lake was too dangerous and returned to their hotel rooms for rest and relaxation before the race started. They failed to notify personnel of their withdrawal. Race officials had canceled the swim leg by 7:15am or less than 20 minutes from the default start time. Officials and swim spotters started clearing the lake at that time, pulling out athletes into boats, putting life preservers on some, and sending stronger swimmers back to the starting point. Others, like me, never received the message while in the lake.

I found Wade okay at his bike. Tired and unsettled, he felt fine otherwise. Officials announced the race would resume at 10:00am with a one loop bike and run and swim times excluded from results. The race was re-started in time trial format by age-group, at three-second intervals in numeric order. Contestants expressed disappointment about the changed race format and shortened distances. None of us earned full-distance finisher status. Wade asked what I planned to do. Without hesitation, "I came to compete. I'll be in line ready to go." Wade, three years younger and in the same age-group, queued up a few minutes before me once the race got underway again. Only 101 triathletes chose not to return to the starting line.

Competitors snaked around the transition area with a bike in hand. We inched forward one by one and started racing again. One race official delivered final guidance 5 meters from the start. Another official gauged our emotions from the morning's tragedy and asked how we were coping. He shared a funny comment in an attempt to ease the unplanned stress. I don't remember what he said, but I laughed, started the watch, took a final few steps across the timing mat, and mounted the bike as my time trial started.

Residents, families, friends, and race support lined the course for the first couple of miles from the state park through downtown. I settled in and spun the cranks into a smooth non-adrenalin-fueled race mode to cover the announced 65 miles of cycling between Utah Lake and T2 on BYU's campus. Next, we biked the lower, southern portion of the original course, mostly flat until we encountered a five-mile-long climb with a tail wind for the final push to T2.

I passed other cyclists, which boosted my confidence. I implemented a handlebar-coaching tip halfway through the ride: “Eat.” Reached into one of three pockets on the back of the bright red bike jersey and pulled out a favorite training snack, peanut butter and cheese-flavored crackers. They tasted so good when at rest after the training rides to the top of South Mountain in Phoenix. Riding at 20+ mph, I bit into the first cracker. It exploded into a dust cloud. The wind turbo-blasted its remains down the back of my throat. I gagged, coughed, and struggled to clear the air passageway. I struggled to keep the bike erect. Almost suffocated from a blocked windpipe. This was an example of why one should never try anything new in a race not practiced beforehand. I rushed through the remaining handlebar coaching tips of “Drink,” “Breathe,” and “Relax” as I spat out the cracker remnants with a water blast from a bottle.

An old folklore belief claims bad things come in threes. It might be true. First, the extended swim warm-up scared the crap out of me. Next came the cracker blast. Then five miles down the road, the rear tire blew with a loud “pop.” I rolled to a stop and repaired a flat tire—glad I had practiced. Opened the quick release level and pulled off the wheel. Slipped off the tire, stripped out the inner tube, ringed a finger on the tire’s inside and felt nothing sharp. Slotted in the replacement tube, tucked the tire’s bead into the rim’s groove, placed the tire inflator adapter onto the valve, twisted on a CO₂ cartridge. I did a quick set of leg stretches. Locked the wheel in place, stashed the holey tube in a shirt pocket, and pedaled off toward T2. Total elapsed time from foot down to foot up took less than two minutes.

We rode through an aid station within a mile of where the flat tire occurred. Someone set up a modified basketball backboard and goal post atop a trash bin for empty water bottles. I pulled out the inner tube, and the spent CO₂ cartridge and tossed them. I went two-for-two, which provided humor for an ex-Hoosier wannabe basketball player turned runner turned triathlete. Overcoming the three minor adversities required a few skills: mental toughness, levity, and flexibility. Equally important, I kept moving forward in the unplanned rough swim, fixed the flat tire, and recovered from the cracker explosion—all to achieve the day’s objective. Even if the day’s goal changed, like today, from earning full-distance status to getting across the finish line in the shortest amount of time, we adapted. With my head back in the race, I re-passed the people who passed me when fixing the flat tire.

Volunteers on the roads experienced the race delay too. They knew less of what occurred during the swim leg than the racers. Yet they stayed the course. They are the reason Mike Reilly could say, “The race is a catered affair.” Helpers exceeded our replenishment expectations in a fast-paced and stressful environment. Their relentless ability to hand out food and drinks supplied a continual flow of triathletes’ fuel and hydration needs in a non-traditional drive-

through location, a pop-up aid station. There are no menu boards. No microphones. No speakers. No point-of-sale devices. No click and pay. Triathletes use the shout, point, and snatch methods for food ordering; volunteers reacted by listening, extending their arms, and releasing the items in a well-choreographed set of moves.

In a continual process, they received drink and food orders. Each order was delivered to a cycling customer within seconds, making the drive-thru at a fast-food joint seem like an overnight stay compared to triathletes pedaling through aid stations. Volunteers lifted drink after drink from the tables and ice buckets. They stretched their arms for a split-second connection, holding on with enough force to not drop the various forms of nutrition and let the cyclist grab and pull it from their hands. They rotated their body from competitor to table, reached for stuff based on cues from triathletes, and handed out the goodies as their patrons rolled by. Each server handled multiple orders, one after another after another: water, electrolyte drinks, gels, bananas, and sports nutrition bars. This put an entirely new meaning to the “Grab N Go” marketing concept of convenient foods. Their high energy levels also delivered encouragement to rolling targets; they kept us going when we needed them. Volunteers performed their services without anticipated financial tips, yet they were the best servers ever. They treated us like their most important customer. And for that, I was blissfully grateful.

A resident in her 60s or 70s cheered us on in front of her house near the midpoint of the bike leg. Her encouragement sounded like an experienced cyclist on a grand tour, “Around the turn you get a tailwind. Pick up your cadence and speed back to town.” She knew the headwinds took a toll on us. The same winds that churned up the lake pushed us around on the bike in the open landscape. Riders thanked her for the inspiration. I talked to over two hundred people: competitors, spectators, officials, sponsors, competitors’ supporters, my friends, training partners, car passengers, police officers, and all volunteers I made eye contact with during the race. A welcomed surprise of long-distance racing. The unexpected race bonding was a pleasant and memorable experience.

The most remarkable thing happened at the end of the bike leg: a volunteer collected my bike steps beyond the dismount line—never experienced that before in 70+ triathlons. I did not need to find the empty rack spot that matched the race number on the bike. Only needed to find the bike-to-run transition bag, change the kit, and run 13.1 miles on foot.

Sadly, the most non-cool thing also occurred with the first step off the bike as hellfire pain shot through the quads, hamstrings, and lower back when attempting to run after pumping and spinning for 71 miles. With a strong infusion of sarcasm, the legs would have functioned as designed if we biked only 65 miles as informed at the re-start. As it was, I shuffled to grab the transition

bag. I stumbled into the change tent, performed a complete change, plopped down, and swapped cycling shorts and a jersey for running shorts and a tank top. Exchanged a bike helmet for a running hat. I also treated myself to new socks. Stood up from the bench, stretched the legs, and took the first strides to the finish line.

The run ended at the BYU stadium with the final 300 meters on the track. I became a track runner again and took off with all I had left. The run felt like a full-out sprint with long strides and quick turnover. Picked up the pace, not so much to pass as many competitors as possible, but that is what four years of college track conditioned me to do.

As expected, I crossed the finish line in full stride and heard my name announced without announcing any of us as IRONMAN. Disappointed but not devastated. No, we did not earn the status, notwithstanding the months of commitment, effort, and accomplishments. That honor now had to be deferred for another race. I finished, but the race felt like more of a dress rehearsal. I did not reach the original goal though I gained experience. Nevertheless, the race provided the confidence needed for another attempt. No one could take that away from me.

In response to competitors expressing disappointment about the shortened course and paying for something that wasn't delivered, race officials notified us within a week that waivers would be issued to 500 triathletes for the full-distance Vineman Triathlon in California later in August and an additional 400 opportunities for IRONMAN races the following year.

Wade and I returned to Utah Lake for an easy run on Sunday morning. What a difference a day makes: a flat lake, minimal winds, and bright sunshine. The cold front and the terror it created had moved on. I finished 104th overall. Wade finished 111th overall. He was a mere 14 seconds behind me, about 50 meters, in the abbreviated 84-mile race that lasted a few ticks under five hours for both of us. Based on the ratio of competitors in our age-group to all racers, I fell short one place in qualifying for the IRONMAN World Championship. Also referred to by others as IRONMAN Hawaii, Hawaii, Worlds, or simply, KONA.

In triathloning, a roll-down is similar to succession planning in the business world. A roll-down slot is created when a qualified racer chooses not to compete in the subsequent race. The next quickest racer in the same age and gender category is offered the slot and earns a qualifying entry into the championship race. The roll-down process ensures an adequate number of high-caliber triathletes compete in the goal race. Often, the roll-down is the difference between earning another finisher's medal on the world scene or staying home to train much smarter for next year's race.

The procedure is a pressure-filled process with athletes hoping for an opportunity to receive an invitation to a race that includes more significant

challenges or walking away without a race but frees up time to enter a different race and try again. Furthermore, a triathlete earns the right to move above the cut-off and proclaim things like Worlds team member, world-class age-grouper, the elite of the heap, KONA Qualifier (KQ), or better, a KONA Finisher.

All qualifiers in our age-group had signed up for Hawaii except the winner. Wade and I looked for roll-down possibilities and attended the roll-down ceremony with cash ready and hopes high. He advised, "Never turn down a qualifying spot to KONA." At noon, the roll-down process started with unclaimed qualifying spots doled out to the next-in-line racers by age-group and gender. All roll-down hopefuls, and the race officials who doled out the now unclaimed spots, filled an anxiety-charged hotel conference room. My name came up first to fill out KONA's male age-group line-up. I qualified by 1 second or about four meters in front of the person behind me.

On the flight home, the triathlon replayed in my mind. None of us had read a playbook about how to race under severe and tragic conditions. Competitors figured out on the fly how to navigate the tall waves, adjust to the weird start, compromise for the missing buoys, and compensate for the lack of accurate information. We adjusted to the time trial start on the bike, battled the winds, and fixed the flats. We worked through the bike-to-run pains during the run and overcame the disappointment of not being IRONMANs. However, Wade and I did carry an abbreviated playbook on our handlebars, much like how quarterbacks wear plays on their wrists in football games. The contents may have differed; however, we benefitted from our race day tactics. We used them all for success, along with a few audibles. The handlebar coaching continued for years afterward as the wisdom remains timeless and priceless.

Back home, Hayes commented about "Dad's friend" who died during the swim. In Provo, we learned that life was not guaranteed even with lifeguards. Triathlons and many other endeavors are risky propositions. Before going to future races, Hayes asked if enough lifeguards would be in the water for the swim leg. Her concerns were well learned from knowing not to swim in our pool, a lake, river, or ocean without a lifeguard.

While I did not personally know John Boland, Hayes was smart enough to make the connection for me. Within triathloning, a unity of sorts exists among all triathletes, whether we know each other or not. We are bonded in a common sport, and we lost someone from the tri-family. With reflection on Mr. Boland, we departed Utah and gave him a symbolic hug goodbye on his final leg.

Results: 104th overall. 9th in age-group.

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Woody, my Australian Cattle dog mutt training partner and competitor at the Dog Jog on May 22, 1989, in Des Moines, Iowa. *(Photo by Chris Morris)*



Run leg in Provo, Utah, on my first attempt in a full-distance triathlon at IRONMAN Utah, on June 6, 2002. *(From the Morris Family photo archives)*