

Recap IMC 2006: In many ways the event really started over a year ago when Paul convinced me that signing-up was the thing to do. Many people to train with, I was not getting any younger, and in 2007 no one (I know) would be doing it. So...despite a full plate (dissertation to write, new full-time job, family commitments) and some trepidation, I forked over my \$500 big ones and decided to fulfill the longtime dream of finishing an Ironman. Interestingly, when I looked back over my file of "to do's in life" the first time I scratched Ironman as a goal was 1982 - the year Julie Moss crawled over the finish line in Hawaii and Ironman became known to the masses. I was 15.

The past week in Penticton was a great time, and will clearly be remembered as the adventure I hoped it would be. The drive Thursday was a bit long (10 hours), but coming into Penticton you know the city lives for Ironman as every business



establishment is offering something related to Ironman (Ironman Duncan Donuts anyone?). Friday morning we decided to begin the day with a short swim in Okanagan Lake where the actual swim race was happening. As it turned out, a storm front was moving through and the lake was more like an ocean with some visible white caps. It made for an

interesting (nervous) swim. Afterward, we officially got checked-in and picked-up the race information and rules. Much of the rest of the day was spent driving the bike course and getting our gear prepped for the race – a monumental task that seemed to never end. We bought a map to help us navigate the bike course and actually felt some relief after seeing what we were up against. The first major climb, Richter Pass, comes after about 40 miles of basically flat and fairly fast terrain. The climb up Richter is both long (10KM) and steep (6% grade) and can hardly be appreciated from the photo of me casually standing by the road of pain. But it is early enough in the race that it is doable. The second climb is more challenging in that



it comes later in the race (around mile 85) and is a bit longer than Richter, but not quite as steep. That night Ironman hosted a pasta dinner for all the athletes in the Penticton convention center and showed some video from past events. I am not sure I have ever been to a dinner that seemed to be attended by over 1500 people. Perhaps most impressive was the number of people who have successfully completed Ironman Canada over a dozen times! For me, I just wanted to finish once. One of the training books I had read said that as the race drew closer there was a temptation to start thinking about possible finishing times, and playing with the idea of just what time I could possibly obtain. Although I saw Paul up all night on his computer running some race optimization program, I stayed true to my word and avoided making any race time



predictions, other than finishing. The day before the race (Saturday) was spent sorting all our gear into transition bags and dropping them off at the transition area. I was not quite sure how 2500 people were going to be effectively directed to their stuff, but it all worked better than I had anticipated. The Saturday night dinner was much better than the previous night, and I sucked-up as much pasta as I could muster (although not as much as Arash as you can tell from the photo). Andy sat next to me and I could tell he became quite anxious when he heard I was in his age bracket. He was hoping to qualify for a spot at Kona and when I told him I was riding a Fuji Aloha he knew then I was a force to be reckoned with. After the dinner we all got the obligatory prep talk from the Ironmaster Arash. There is no question that many times during the run/walk part of the



the marathon I felt like calling it quits and getting a ride back to base camp. "Why keep going if all I can



do is walk?" But then his face would pop in and the words "whatever happens out there, YOU HAVE TO FINISH" pushed me



forward. The guy really has a career as a motivational speaker (although I think he needs to work on the hand gestures a bit). Saturday night I surprisingly slept like a baby, although perhaps I should have been a bit more concerned about how the race would play out. But I told myself over and over, "I KNOW I can do the swim no problem, I have done the bike distance in training rides and KNOW I can complete it, but the run...well the worse case scenario is I can always walk the run. I couldn't think of anything worse at the time. As I snored away poor Paul was having panic attacks. The cursor got stuck on his laptop and his optimization program was giving him spurious results. Fortunately, I awoke just in time to use my psychotherapizing skills to calm him down. The rest of the night he sat in a Yogi pose meditating with incense coming out of his ears and nose. Sunday started at 4am as we ate our last meal before the race and began heading down to the start. There was a tremendous amount of energy everywhere as athletes made last minute preparations. We



dropped off our special needs bags (one each for the bike and run) which contained a photo of Kelly and Trevor, and then got numbered. At the race start U2's it's a Beautiful Day was blaring over the loud speaker.

The pros left at 6:45 and us amateurs hit the water at 7am sharp. My first impression was that this is a wild ride! It was absolutely amazing swimming in a crowd of 2500 people. Although I felt like I was in a blender for the first mile, I was amazed after about 15-20 minutes to look over to my right and

see Paul swimming along side of me. What were the odds? He looked comfortable and a second later he was gone. As I made my way around the turn-around point I kept looking deep into the water for divers, but I never saw any (although Paul said he saw one). During the final mile of the swim I was ready to be done. Although I was swimming at a comfortable pace



and avoided getting any cramps, I was feeling a bit water-logged. As I hit the shore after about an hour (1:05) I heard the announcer say "The first 400 athletes have now completed the swim." I felt some relief knowing that 2100 people were behind me because the swim was my best event. In the transition area I was happy to see Paul and we did the high-five thing before heading out for the long ride.



The first 20-30 miles were very pleasant, and I was glad to see Tim around mile 30 doing well. He gave me some words of encouragement and then cruised on by. Throughout the bike course I snapped photos from a throw-away camera because I figured the few extra minutes I

might lose in taking the photos would not make much of a difference in my overall time (which proved to be true). Richter pass was challenging, but I went slow and stayed hydrated. By the time I hit the special needs bag around mile 80 I was really ready for some Nutter Butter cookies. I got off my bike, spread out my picnic blanket, did some stretching, and chatted with a nice fellow about the remaining miles of the ride. When you subtract out my 45 minute lunch break my bike time is not half bad (Ok...maybe not quite 45 minutes). By the time I hit the start of Yellow Lake climb I was beginning to feel some



of the effects of the heat. But the crowds were amazing and their cheering kept my thoughts off of how my body was feeling. The decent back into Penticton was fast and I was glad to see Paul already on the run course and looking fairly comfortable. I took my time in the transition area and then headed out to what at the time seemed like an impossible run. As it turned out, it would be a lot more walking than running.



I ran between aid stations until about mile 9 when my body began to shut down. My stomach soured quickly, I became light-headed, and found myself sitting on the side of the road wishing I had put as much planning and training into my run as I had for my swim and bike. I saw Paul heading the opposite direction and knew he was gunning for a good time. He yelled something like "are you alright?" to which I lied "yea" knowing there was nothing he

could do. I got up and walked to the next aid station. I knew I needed to keep taking-in liquids to avoid getting further dehydrated, but the more I took in the worse I felt. I made it to the 13 mile turn-around point and got my special needs bag. It was nice having the pictures of Kelly and Trevor, but looking at the rest of the carefully packed food in the bag just got me more queasy. Finally, by mile 14 or so I was cooked. At the next aid station I toppled over and dry-heaved on

the side of the road. It was a pain I had not anticipated nor knew how to stop. Fortunately, the volunteers at the aid station were amazing! They called a medic who quickly came over and said "drink two cups of hot chicken broth, sit for a bit and let your stomach settle, and then get out there and finish the race." Although I had been on the verge of blacking out I lied when he asked me about being light-headed. I finally got going again and yards past the aid station was back on the ground feeling like I would pass out. At this point I figured it was close to over for me, but then the words of Arash came back "You Gotta Finish!" So...I got up and started walking again. I thought about the \$500 bucks I regretted spending on such a stupid ego trip, the pain in my knees, all the time I spent training on weekends away from my family, the expense in coming to Canada and time off from work...and I thought about how crappy I would feel if I didn't finish. None of this really helped me feel much better so I began counting from 100 backwards to take my mind off how lousy I was feeling. 100, 99, 98...46...and then I would start over. But counting numbers got boring quickly and I began obsessing again about how crappy my body



was feeling. About that time I struck up a conversation with a guy named Ben who was also doing the race for the first time and having about as much fun as I was on the final leg. We talked about his two young kids and my son, and what it was like to be a father and have time to train for an Ironman. We talked about Osama Bin Laden, how good Cola was tasting at the aid stations, why the sport of triathlon attracts fanatics, and we witnessed a woman in very bad shape getting an IV as the ambulance prepared a stretcher to take her away.

We vowed to make it to the finish line as daylight faded into night, and were given fluorescent green glow sticks...a good indicator that it had been a LONG day. By the time we reached mile 24 we could see the finish line lights ahead and were coming upon more and more spectators. We started jogging slowly, reenergized by the cheering crowds. Finally, at 14:48:37 I crossed the line and heard the announcer say "John Fitzgerald, you are an IRONMAN". I remember at the time not feeling very Ironman-like after my degrading run, but just grateful that the whole thing was over. Ben and I shook hands, and then I saw Paul with a big smile. He quickly called Kelly and I told her it was over. Apparently, I sounded like I was going to die on the cell phone, and it was not until later that night when we talked again that she felt some assurance that I survived.

In the end, I did what I set out to do which was finish. I know now that race performance is very much linked to training (I needed more on the run!), and that more does not necessarily equate to better. Many of the folks from Portland that trained much harder (and longer hours) than myself blew-up in their own ways as well. Overheating.



Dehydration. Hyponatremia. But I will hand it to Paul, all the spreadsheets, electronic gadgets, and tenacious planning really did pay off. He had perhaps the best day of everyone, and although luck always plays a role in an Ironman, he was the boy scout that was the most prepared.

Next year Ironman Canada will celebrate its 25th anniversary and the number of competitors is slated to increase even more (not good). They are even talking about more than one wave at the



start which would really change the entire dynamic of the race. Although it is becoming increasingly commercialized, it is for the most part a well-run race with amazing volunteer support and unlike any other race I have done. Will I do another Ironman? Perhaps...but not for some time and not until I have the appropriate time to train for the event. I was reminded many times during the race that I am not in my twenties anymore, and soon won't even be in my thirties!

On the drive home I thought about how good it was going to feel to get back to a less intensive training schedule and focus on what means the most to me – my family. Trevor now says “Daddy Ironman” and perhaps in the future I will get to say “Trevor Ironman”! Until next time...