

Ironman Wisconsin September 7, 2008
An Incredible Journey
A journal by Bob Morrison

Preparing

In the spring Lance Leo came to conduct a 2-day swim clinic for triathletes. Lance is an old friend and Mike, Carl, Lance, and I trained together for Ironman Florida in 2000. Unfortunately Lance got hit by a motorcycle while he was on a training run and was in critical condition for several days in the hospital. He, of course, didn't make it to Ironman Florida that year. He now coaches triathletes full time, so I asked if he'd coach me for Ironman Wisconsin. He said yes.

Lance came to Greenville the first weekend in June to do threshold and strength testing on Mike and me. He set up a new running strategy for me where I would combine running and power walking. He thought this would help the GI problems I had in the past. He also set a heart-rate limit for training and racing that was well below the threshold.

I went for a 13-mile walk-run two weeks later and couldn't run without considerable hip pain. I stopped walking after 5 miles. I had been experiencing hip pain for about a year, but had been able to run. There is a bulging disc pinching a nerve in the lower back, apparently at least partially caused by a dysfunctional sacroiliac joint.

I talked to Lance weekly to assess where I was with respect to training and the pain levels. I was, and am still, seeing a physical therapist twice a week. I wasn't able to do another training walk until 5 weeks before IM Wisconsin after I started getting epidural cortisone shots. Then I started a rapid ramping up of the walking distance up to 14 miles 2.5 weeks before race day – slightly into the taper period. I tried jogging during this 14-mile walk, but the pain level went up too high. I was able to do a little jogging on two one-hour walks during the last two weeks of the taper, after the 3rd cortisone shot. The strength training was rather sporadic since it seemed to contribute to the hip/back pain.

Since I couldn't walk/jog, Lance increased pool time and time on the bike so I could get increased volume in these two disciplines to counteract the lack of training in the running discipline. I swam 5 days a week and biked 4. I took a lot of ibuprofen. I met with Brandon Tilley weekly for swim coaching. There were two back-to-back weeks with weekly swimming mileage of over 7 miles, with the peak day being 4900 yards. I had never done that volume of training for the swim. I think this high volume of training in the pool and on the bike got me in really good shape, even though I was a little short on the jogging/walking training.

It was felt that being down on aero-bars contributed to the lower back problem. So I stayed off the aero-bars, but this increased the fatigue in the hands and shoulders. I borrowed a pair of Profile jammer bars from Bruce Flye and put those on my handlebars to provide another position for the long rides. That seemed to help, but they were in the way and prevented the use of the aero-bars.

Thanks to the Tricredibles for being training partners on long rides!!!

Swim

On Thursday morning three days before the Ironman race there was a light rain from the remnants of hurricane Gustav. I went for a short swim at the race site to try out a new wetsuit that was available for purchase at the Ironman expo. It was nice but I didn't get it. The water was a little choppy. Friday I went for another short swim. The water was perfect. Mike said it felt so good he had a hard time turning around and coming back in. He wanted to keep going.

On race day the water was calm and 71 degrees. It was perfect.

I had mapped out a schedule that I had to maintain if I were going to finish before midnight. Though in the back of my mind, or maybe even openly, I thought my chances of finishing the 26.2-mile run at the end were about 10-20%. That was okay with me. It's such a thrill to be in the water when the starting gun goes off. My optimistic schedule was 1:40 for the swim, 10 min. for the swim-to-bike transition, T1, 7:40 for the bike, 10 min. for the bike-to-run transition, T2, then 7:15 for the marathon, for a total of 16:55. Deb said that was cutting it too close and I should target 16:30 and finish at 11:30 p.m. I said ok I'll try to get there at 11:30. (Since I didn't expect to finish I saw no reason for not shortening this fictitious schedule.)

I saw Mike at the start as we were both trying to be last into the water so we could start at the back of the crowd of 2,200-2,400 swimmers. My family was viewing the start from the top of Monona Terrace, and Dana was coincidentally sitting on the shoulders of the son of Bob Bell, the other 70-year-old in my age group. He missed the bike cutoff.

I started out slow. The first loop was uneventful with only a soft kick in the goggles and another to the stomach to interrupt the rhythm. I ran into a guy crossing my path.

"Sorry." He said.

Later I ran into him again.

"Sorry again." He said.

I concentrated on stroke mechanics, echoing to myself Brandon's instructions – high elbow on recovery, glide, keep the head down, high elbow on the pull. The water at the far corner was a little bumpy, but that didn't bother me on the first loop. On the second loop it was a little bumpier and my stomach started feeling upset. That feeling persisted the last half mile, and I started thinking negative thoughts. Whatever possessed me to do this? What was the point? This sick feeling reaffirmed my decision to make this my last Ironman. I decided that in the unlikely event that I won a slot to Hawaii, I would turn it down.

Just before the last turn I heard the announcer say the clock was at 1:30. I got excited! I was going to be close to the first target on the schedule. I got out of the water at 1:41 – close enough. I saw Coach Lance cheering. I saw my family cheering:

"GO BOB".

Bike

There was a wide grin on my face all the way through transition. I took my time in T1 because I had allotted 10 minutes. But I had forgotten about the long walk

up the helix and the long walk in transition to get to the bike start. T1 took 19 minutes. So now I was about 10 minutes behind schedule.

It was fairly flat near Madison, but once we got into the country the long steep hills started. This bike course is one of the most difficult (if not the most difficult) Ironman bike courses in the continental U.S. Except for a couple of short stretches for a mile or two you were either going uphill, or down. It was difficult to get into a rhythm. On some of the downhills you could coast up to 35-40 mph, but on one of them there were hay bales in case you went too fast and missed the hairpin turn. On the longest uphill there were cheering spectators lining both sides of the road for a mile or 2.

This was a beautiful, cool day in Wisconsin farm country with large red barns and cattle grazing, and corn fields. On the way out to Mount Horeb it was quite windy, and my speed deteriorated.

"I like your jersey."

Then later: "Nice jersey."

I had a blue jersey with the image of a bright sunburst that Deb had given to me for my birthday several years ago. At the last few Ironman triathlons I had tried to wear something that was somehow tied to my family, so they could be with me in spirit if not physically. Today was a cool day and underneath the jersey I had a very lightweight 5430 T-shirt from a half-Ironman race in Boulder where Cathy had lived. (5430 is the altitude of Boulder.) Deb said I was doubling the luck. A number of spectators remarked on the jersey.

There were performers at various places along the course – an ensemble with two brass horns and percussion, a guy beating a drum (for 6 hours?), a trombone player (Keith would like this.), and pirates lining the streets of Mt. Horeb "Aargh!" I said as I rode by. And Batman appeared in Cross Point.

About half way around the first loop the pro triathletes started lapping me. I had the number 70 on my left calf, put there by a pre-dawn body marker.

"Way to go 70."

"Good job 70." Etc.

Then I heard a female voice.

"Way to go! You are awesome!"

It was Hillary. Hillary Biscay was second at Ironman Louisville the week before, and was (would be) first at this race. Her encouragement made my day.

My rear derailleur wasn't shifting right, and kept missing gears, or shifting on its own. Near the end of the first loop the chain came off the rear cassette as I shifted into high gear going down a hill. I pulled off near the road marshals at a corner on the downhill.

"Do you want me to call tech. support?"

"No thanks. It's not shifting right, but I don't want to take the time."

Just then the InsideOut tech. crew pulled up and came over.

"It's not shifting right."

"Okay. Stay here and we'll fix it."

They took the bike across the road to the support truck. In less than a minute they were back.

"Here you go."

Insideout Sports rocks.

By the end of the first bike loop I was down another 20 minutes from the targeted schedule. This put me down 30 minutes altogether. I wasn't concerned about missing the bike cutoff, but if I lost another 20-30 minutes on the second loop I'd have trouble making the 26.2 by midnight. I wouldn't be able to walk the marathon in 6:30. At the special needs station I adjusted the jammer bars to get them away from the aero-bars. I needed to get into the aero position in this wind. It helped. I didn't lose any more time on the second loop.

On the road to Mt. Horeb (second loop) I met my family driving their car and cheering out the window.

"Go Grandpa!"

They turned around and stopped up ahead and the whole family got out and started cheering. They said later they had been waiting for me for an hour in Mt. Horeb, but gave up. I waved, but didn't slow down to give high-fives. (I was too focused on the ride.) Their support was unbelievable throughout the race.

A rider named Dianne and I had been jockeying back and forth the whole 112. After coming out of the no-pass zone near the end she passed me for the last time.

"You are an inspiration! I just hope I'm alive at 70!"

I came into transition T2 at 5:00, a little behind the 4:30 p.m. target. Shirley, Deb, Dana, Kyle, and Keith were cheering wildly as I came into T2.

Run

At the run start I told my family I thought I could actually do this. I felt really good at the start of the run. Lance's nutrition guidance (adjusted for cool weather) worked, and I had stayed near the target heart rate most of the way except for the steep hills, of which there were many. I came out of T2 at 5:05 p.m. so I had a little less than 7 hours for the marathon. I would try to focus on running two 3:30 half-marathons back-to-back. I reset my stopwatch as I started the first half-marathon. At the beginning the hip/back pain level was up enough that I was limping and leaning to the side. The target pace was 15-16 minutes per mile in order to make the time cutoff. The time at mile one was 17:23 and at mile two it was 35 minutes. I tried jogging, but the pain level went too high. I tried to jog again at mile 3 and then again at 4. Both times the pain level went too high. The time at mile four was 1:10. This pace would get me in at around 12:35 a.m. At 5 miles there was a slight downhill and I could jog down it. Okay!! I could jog down the hills!

At the beginning of the day I would have accepted a finish after midnight, or making it to 20 miles, or even 13. But my attitude changed during the race. Anything less than finishing 26.2 before midnight became unacceptable.

The pain level went up a little during this first jog. When I started walking the pain level went down. Then at 6 miles I started jogging again. My goal now was to do just enough jogging each mile to get in a 15 minute per mile pace. This was working. This was fun!!! I love to run, and had had a very frustrating training season the last 3 months. Before taking a series of cortisone shots 5 weeks ago I couldn't even go on training walks, and limped across campus every day from my car to the office.

Somewhere around 7 or 8 miles my brain seemed to make a pact with my body and the hip/back pain went away altogether, or maybe it was masked by the other discomforts that were creeping in. But the pain didn't come back the rest of the race.

I stopped and sat on the curb at about 10 miles to dump the sand out of my shoes. But when I took my shoes off there was no sand, just blisters.

On the next jog segment:

"Hey Bob! You're looking great."

"Mike! How did you like my favorite bike course?"

"It was brutal."

At the half-way point I had 3:21 on the stopwatch. I had put in a couple of 12-minute miles to catch up from the slow start of the run. I reset it for the next sub 3:30 half marathon. Focusing on a half-marathon at a time seemed to be working. Lance was there cheering. My family was there cheering. Deb was really excited to see that I might actually do this. Shirley's eyes always showed concern for my well-being. She always wanted to know if I was hurting.

During the second half I did just enough jogging to maintain a pace between 14 and 15 minutes per mile. I was worried about running too much because I had not trained for running. I focused on doing one mile at a time, and not going faster than the intended pace for each mile. At the end of each jogging segment I felt like jogging further, but didn't. I had to have patience. My family went to the 19-mile turnaround, but I had already gone.

At 23 miles Lance showed up.

"I'm here for you the rest of the way."

At 24 miles Lance called Keith and left a message to let them know we'd be at the finish line in 30 minutes. It was 11:05 p.m. We didn't know that Keith's Blackberry had a dead battery and was out of service. Lance peeled off at about 25.5 and I started the final jog to the finish. I was running tall. Even though in reality I was bent over, leaning to the side, and shuffling along, I felt like I was running tall.

Finish!!!

At the corner leading into the finish chute my family was there, cheering loudly. Except for Kyle who was sound asleep on Keith's shoulder. Dana grabbed my hand and we ran down the long finish chute and across the finish line together. Then Dana and I had our finish photo taken together. This was a very special moment. This had been an incredible, unlikely journey and sharing it with Dana was very special. I think she thought it was special too. Deb was jumping up and down screaming. Shirley was excited, and I think in disbelief because she knew how much pain I had been in these last few months. I said I was going to wear the finisher's T-shirt every day until it started stinking.

Deb was talking on her cell-phone to my sister Jan. She and Deb had been talking off and on most of the day to monitor my progress. I tried to talk to her but the finish line was so loud I couldn't hear her. So we talked later.

I was remembering the instructions given at the mandatory pre-race meeting on Friday evening. The representative from the medical team had said that if you want to stay out of the medical tent keep moving after you cross the finish line.

Get some pizza and keep walking. He said that your body will be used to your leg muscles pumping blood and if you quit walking you're likely to pass out and end up in medical. So I got some pizza, then kept moving.

Dana, Deb and I went to pick up gear bags. They carried them. I thought my job was to just keep the legs moving. All the muscles in my body seemed to be locking up. When we got back to the car I was feeling a little light headed so I walked back and forth for a couple of minutes before getting into the car. Six years ago when I finished Ironman Wisconsin the first time, I had collapsed while walking my bike back to the car, and I had ended up in the medical tent. Not this time. I was staying out of medical. I would be okay.

The next morning I had toast and bacon for breakfast because I had a craving for something greasy.

Technical nutritional stuff for you Ironmen and Ironwomen.

I consumed about 3,000 calories on the bike. This included a Boost in T1 and another at the special needs station at 60 miles, a Clif bar, and two 1200-calorie bottles of CarboPro 1200 that I mixed with water in my water bottles. I drank 10 bottles of the water/CarboPro 1200 mixture and took 10 salt tablets on the bike. I didn't bonk on either the bike or run.

I had planned to take 4 aspirin in T2 for anticipated pain but I forgot, and they stayed in my fanny pack for the whole run. On the run I had about 2,000 calories including a Boost at T2 and another at the special needs station, one 1200-calorie bottle of CarboPro 1200 that I mixed with water at aid stations, and one Clif bar. I also had maybe a half dozen salt tablets, but I didn't keep track of these on the run the way I had on the bike. I just thought I should be taking some. (When I got home I was 3 pounds over my pre-race weight, but went to a pound below pre-race weight by the end of the week. I expected to be below pre-race weight, and had been 4 pounds below after IM Hawaii in 1999. You burn a lot of body fat and protein in an IM race. I wondered whether the weight gain was due to fluid retention from too much salt.

On the second half of the marathon I gave up on the CarboPro and consumed Gatorade, cokes, and orange slices. I started feeling nausea the second half so for 12 miles I nibbled on the Clif bar taken from the special needs bag. The taste of the peanut-butter Clif bar seemed to suppress the nausea. Next time I'll have to do something different about nutrition for the last half of the marathon. Next time? How did that thought creep in here?

Video on Youtube.com

Deb took video throughout the day. An edited version can be found on youtube.com by searching for debeddie and looking for Go Bob Go. I've watched it several times because I can't believe I actually crossed the finish line before midnight. I especially like the swim start, and later the grandkids playing in the spinning door. Okay, I like the finish too.

Why just do when you can overdo?