

Surviving a Perfect Triathlon Storm

My Ironman Wisconsin 2005 Race Report

Whoever coined the adage, “The third time’s a charm”, wasn’t talking about Ironman triathlons. I finished the 2005 Ironman Wisconsin Triathlon—my third iron-distance triathlon finish—but this one was no charm. It was, for sure, an extraordinary experience, but it would better be described as a near 15-hour nightmare.

Background

I finished my first iron-distance triathlon—the Ultramax Triathlon—on September 27, 2003, at the age of 48. As I described it at the time, crossing that finish line was an exhilarating end to the most incredible year of my life. Over the previous twelve months, since volunteering at the inaugural Ultramax event in 2002, I trained about 350 hours, taught myself how to swim properly, swam about 80 miles, bought a bicycle (after not having ridden one in at least 25 years), rode over three thousand miles, ran about 850 miles, and competed in my first half-marathon, marathon, and half-iron triathlon—my first sporting events since my last high school basketball game about thirty years before. For twelve months, my entire life was focused on crossing that finish line and becoming an “Ironman”.

On September 25, 2004, I again finished Ultramax. It was also a great experience, but understandably not as meaningful as my first Ultramax.

An iron-distance triathlon consists of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike and a 26.2-mile run. The fastest professional triathletes can finish the course about 8 to 9 hours. Mere mortals like me get up to 17 hours to become an “official” finisher. I’m older and slower than most competitors, and finished in 14:45:39 and 13:37:17 in my two Ultramax races. Just getting to the finish line is victory enough for me.

For the record, “Ironman” is actually a brand name, owned by the World Triathlon Corporation (WTC). As a result, only races organized or licensed by the WTC can call themselves “Ironman” races. Thus, even though the Ultramax Triathlon was the same distance as an Ironman-brand event, it could not call itself an “Ironman” race without infringing on the WTC’s trademark. Races like Ultramax are referred to as “iron distance” races.

The Ironman-brand races are hugely popular. The organizers have the resources and money—including that provided by large sponsors like Ford, Timex and Gatorade—to put on huge, first-class events, and athletes respond by registering for the 2,000 or so slots within days—sometimes hours—after registration opens for the following year’s Ironman races.

The non-Ironman brand events rarely attract more than several hundred competitors. With such small participation, the organizers of these events find it difficult to survive financially. Even though it was a superbly-run event, Ultramax was cancelled in 2005 due to declining participation over its short, three-year history.

I liked doing Ultramax because it was close to home and relatively small. However, I also wanted to see for myself why the Ironman-brand events were so extremely popular. Shortly after 9:00 a.m. on September 13, 2004, when registration for Ironman Wisconsin opened, I signed up for it over the Internet. Once I hit the “submit” button to submit my entry, it was final. There would be no refunds of my \$425 entry fee. If I got hurt the next day or the day before the race, that’s too bad. You take your chances. It was a bit unnerving to commit to something this big one year in advance, but I wanted to do Ironman Wisconsin and see for myself what others were saying about the event. Now that I had signed up and paid my money, there was no turning back.

January - August 2005

One of the problems with doing an iron-distance triathlon in the month of September is that the heaviest weeks of training occur in July and August, which also happen to be our hottest months. In 2004, we had an unusually mild summer. Rarely did the temperatures even hit 90 degrees. It was great for training. However, the summer of 2005 was a much different story. July and August were much hotter than normal. We had a series of days when the temperatures exceeded 100 degrees. The hottest day reached 107 degrees. There were many times when the temperatures were in the mid to upper 90s, often accompanied by oppressive humidity, when I would begin my early-evening run or bike ride. It was absolutely brutal.

The best news about 2005 is that I managed to stay relatively injury-free. This was in stark contrast to my first two years of training and racing. (As slow as I am, I still have trouble calling what I do “racing”.) In those years, there was always something that was hurting. It was especially true in my first year, as the sharp ramp-up in training volume triggered lots of overuse injuries. Whether true or not, I’d like to think that, in my third season, my body has finally gotten stronger and better able to withstand all of the abuse from training.

One disappointment in 2005, though, is that I was slower in all of my races. It may have been the extra ten pounds I was carrying all year, or the hotter conditions for each of these races, or the inconsistent training, or being another year older, or all of the above. Not only was I slower, but I could also feel it. There’s no question my lactate threshold (a measure of the body’s aerobic capacity) was lower this year. Thus, going into Ironman Wisconsin, I knew that I wouldn’t be setting a personal record, but I was hoping to do well. As I do in every event I enter, I would do the best I can.

Tuesday and Wednesday, September 6th and 7th

The distance from the Lake of the Ozarks to Madison, Wisconsin is about 550 miles. To break up the trip, I drove to St. Louis on Tuesday and stayed at my mom’s house. I ran some errands and did some last-minute shopping before continuing on to Madison on Thursday morning.

I also did some last-minute training to maintain my sharpness. (I think the benefits of these final week preparations are more mental than physical.) I did a short, easy, 4-mile run on Wednesday afternoon. During the run, though, I noticed some throat irritation. It was strange. I don’t ever

recall having something like that. By the evening, the discomfort moved down toward my lungs. Was it bronchitis? Every time I swallowed some food or inhaled, I could feel it. Great. Now what? Was it going to get worse? Am I facing a problem in traveling to Madison, and a huge problem for race day on Sunday? Months of training and thousands of miles down the drain? Thank God, the discomfort diminished over the next day, and disappeared entirely the following day. Whew. Disaster averted.

Thursday, September 8th

As that famous *Saturday Night Live* commentator, Roseanne Roseannadanna, used to say, “It’s always something”. Well, as I pulled out of the driveway at 9:00 a.m. to drive 380 miles to Madison, I noticed a small puddle of oil on the driveway where I had parked my truck the night before. As I backed out further, I saw that I was leaving a trail of oil. I said to myself what *Everybody Loves Raymond*’s Frank Barone would say: “Holy crap!” I had the oil changed the previous day, and something was terribly wrong. Since I had been driving around town after the oil change, I was worried—to put it mildly—that I may have lost a lot of oil and damaged the engine. I immediately drove to the oil-change place, and they said the oil filter was defective. It sounds suspicious and I didn’t see any defect in the filter when they showed it to me, but I didn’t have the time or interest to pursue it. They installed another filter, added oil to replace what was lost, and I was on my way. I only lost 30 minutes to this episode, but the stress was something I could have done without. I stopped several times on the way to Madison to make sure there were no further leaks.

Driving through Illinois is a pleasure, but boring. The highways are in excellent condition and people drive sensibly. The scenery is row after row after row of corn. Billions of rows. I really couldn’t tell how badly the crop was affected by the hot, dry summer.

As soon as you hit the Wisconsin state line, all hell breaks loose. People drive like maniacs. I probably passed hundreds of trucks in Illinois, but every truck was passing me in Wisconsin. Plus, the highways were rougher than Illinois. The roads in the city of Madison were even worse. I was hoping the country roads on the Ironman bike course would be in much better shape. Fat chance. More on that later.

I arrived in Madison around 4:00 p.m. and headed straight for the Courtyard by Marriott – East hotel. This two year-old hotel was among the most beautiful hotel I’ve ever stayed in. It was well worth the \$99/night. I had made my reservation a year ago, and was glad that it turned out well. It’s not close to the race site, but the drive there is not too bad.



Courtyard by Marriott – East. The flags were flying at half-staff because of Hurricane Katrina.

By the way, Madison is the capital city of Wisconsin. The capitol building, the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Monona Terrace convention center (the start/finish location of Ironman Wisconsin) and Lake Monona are all beautiful, but the rest of the city is pretty ordinary. Madison is also home to the University of Wisconsin—one of the top-rated “party” schools in the country. Having a major university near a race site is a big advantage in that it helps bring out huge, cheering crowds—something very helpful to athletes during a long, grueling race.



Wisconsin State Capitol



The Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center, as viewed from across Lake Monona.

Friday, September 9th

One of the highlights of my trip was meeting about 25 fellow triathletes whom I had “met” over the past few years on the Tri Newbies Online (TNO) internet forum. We met for breakfast at the Pancake Café in suburban Madison, and it was a blast. These are truly amazing people. It’s been a long time since I’ve been with so many motivated, focused people in one room. They come from all different backgrounds, but they were surprisingly similar in that they shared the traits one would expect from people about to attempt something so challenging. Many of them were also attempting their first Ironman.



Some of the triathletes from Tri Newbies Online at the Pancake Cafe

One of the athletes came up to me and told me that some of my past posts on the TNO forum helped convince him to attempt Ironman Wisconsin. I apologized profusely for unknowingly encouraging him to do so. (Thankfully, he finished the race and is now an “Ironman”, a distinction he will proudly carry for the rest of his life.) I guess in some small way I inspired

him to pursue this challenge, just like I was inspired by all of those athletes I saw while volunteering at Ultramax on September 28, 2002. That's one of the things I've noticed about Ironman triathlons. Every one who attempts one has been inspired to do so, either by watching one in person or on television. No one decides to do it sight unseen, or without some inspiration.

I was fortunate to have seen many of the TNO athletes the day after the race, and the camaraderie was remarkable. You'd think we were all old friends, even though most of us had never seen each other just four days earlier. Fortunately, as best as I can recall, every athlete who attended the pancake breakfast finished the race.

Friday afternoon was mostly spent over at the race site, picking up my race packet, shopping at the athletes' expo and taking pictures and video of the area (and looking like one of those tourists I complain about at the Lake). The atmosphere around the Monona Terrace was like nothing I've ever seen. You could tell from all the activity and people that this was a BIG event. It's a bit intimidating if you've never done an event of this size. At a small race, you can easily find and walk up to the race director and ask a question. Here, you probably couldn't even find him. I guess it's like going to a school with 100 kids in your class, versus 2,000. It's much more impersonal. It reminded me of the Bob Seger song "Feel Like A Number". For this race, I would be known as #1579.



2,067 bicycles atop the Monona Terrace parking lot on race morning. (ASI photo)

Friday night was drudgery. I had to pack my “swim-to-bike” and “bike-to-run” transition bags. I had to decide exactly what clothes and other stuff to put in these bags. I would get another chance early on race day to put in them anything I forgot or wanted to add, but once the race begins, it’s too late. If you forgot to pack something you really needed, you’re out of luck unless an aid station has it. I tend to pack for every contingency, and things worked out well. I also got the bike ready by packing three spare tire tubes (they had lots of flat tires last year when some vandal threw tacks on the bike course) and putting my race number on it. Oh, and I put my bike bell on it. I bought a \$4.00 bike bell with a picture of Bambi on it, and thought I would have some fun with it on the bike course. (I try to do everything I can during races to lighten the mood and get my mind off the misery.) I think I was the only participant with a \$4,000, carbon-fiber frame bicycle that also had a \$4 bell. Too bad I didn’t further accessorize it with handlebar streamers and a plastic wicker basket up front. I might have made it on the television broadcast.



A \$4 bell on a \$4,000 bike. That’s Bambi on top.

Saturday, September 10th

Saturday was transition bag and bike drop-off day. I drove downtown, walked my bike and bags a few blocks over to the Monona Terrace and dropped them off in the appropriate places. I then bought a few items at the Inside/Out Sports booth and walked to the swim start area to familiarize myself with everything before tomorrow morning. I left not too long thereafter since I don’t like to be on my feet too long the day before a long race. On the way back to the hotel, I stopped and ate lunch at Culver’s. I love their hamburgers, and protein is important for long endurance events. I later ate dinner at Farotto’s. Pasta served fast-food style isn’t very good, but nothing beats pasta when you need to load up on carbohydrates the night before a race. Between lunch and dinner, I ate salty snacks like PowerBars and pretzels, and drank Gatorade. It had been days since I had eaten any true junk food. That would have to wait until the race was over.

Saturday was also spent packing my bike and run “special needs” bags. These bags are transported by the race staff to the halfway points of the bike and run courses on race day so that, if you think you might need something at the halfway point that you didn’t need at the start, you can grab them and take what you need. I put some Endurolytes (i.e. electrolyte tablets), Lava Salt tablets, and PowerBars in each bag. I also put a long-sleeve T-shirt in my run bag in case the air turned chilly after dark.

Saturday night was time to focus on mental preparation. When I did my first Ultramax in 2003, I didn't know how to mentally prepare for something like this since I had never done one before. Now that I've finished two of them, I find it easier to handle the mental aspect. In short, my preparation consists of a detailed mental "walk-through" of the entire race. In it, I think about my pacing strategy, my nutrition/hydration schedule, my need to stay focused on what I'm doing at all times, and my need to stay in control when the unexpected happens. (Unexpected things always happen.) I've found from experience that this approach to mental preparation works well for me.

I took one-half of a Tylenol PM tablet around 8:00 p.m., and climbed into bed with a magazine to read. By 9:00, I was sleepy and turned out the lights. My watch alarm and the alarm clock were both set to 3:45 a.m.

Race day - Sunday, September 11th

As soon as I woke up, I sat up and said to myself, "Let's do it!" This is the same thing I did and said after waking up on the mornings of my Ultramax races. I'm a creature of habit.

Thanks to the Tylenol PM, I slept fairly well. There were a few times when I woke up, but I gradually fell back to sleep. I've found that the most important sleep comes two nights before the race. It's difficult to get a deep, restful sleep the night before a race—even with a little help from Tylenol PM.

I immediately started eating breakfast, which consisted of cereal, a banana, orange juice, canned peaches and a bagel—about 700 calories in total. I took two Aleve (a miracle over-the-counter drug for all-day pain relief) and my electrolyte tablets. I then got dressed and left for the race at around 4:45 a.m. I brought a PowerBar and a bottle of Gatorade along with me. I ate the PowerBar around 6:00 a.m. (one hour before the start) and drank most of the Gatorade around 6:30 a.m.

I arrived downtown around 5:20 a.m. and parked a few blocks from the Monona Terrace. I dropped off my special needs bags at the designated location and headed for the Terrace. It's hard to describe the scene of 2,000 athletes getting ready for an Ironman race. The atmosphere is a strange combination of nervousness, quiet anticipation, and excitement.

Around 6:15 a.m., things started happening. Racers started putting on their sunscreen and wetsuits and started heading toward the swim start area. Spectators started jockeying for position. By 6:40, the athletes were all at the swim start area and began to enter the water in large numbers. The announcer kept urging the athletes to keep moving down the ramp, but it took time to get so many people through the narrow area. I walked down the ramp and swam out to where I wanted to position myself. I watched the morning sun gradually rise over Lake Monona and took in the stunning view of the Monona Terrace with thousands of spectators all around it. At 7:00 a.m., The Star Spangled Banner was sung, and the cannon sounded. After a year of anticipation, I was finally doing Ironman Wisconsin.



Sunrise over Lake Monona.



*Spectators in position on the Monona Terrace parking ramp "helix".
(The swim start/finish is at the upper right-hand corner.)*



Some spectators go all-out. (ASI photos)

The weather

Weather would become the story of this race. Like all of the other athletes, I closely followed the weather forecast for race day all week long. Weather can play a huge role in an endurance event. It can be the difference between having a great race and not finishing.

Early in the week, the forecast for race day called for partly cloudy skies and a high temperature in the mid 80s. That is similar to the conditions for Ultramax last year, and the heat was tough to deal with on that day. Unfortunately, the forecast kept getting worse, except that there was no rain expected. (I was worried about rain, since I don't have any experience riding in it. It's dangerous riding on wet pavement when your tires are less than an inch wide and have no tread,

and when your brakes are ineffective in grabbing wet wheel rims.) The forecasted high temperature was gradually increased to the low 90s. The air would also be humid. As if that wasn't enough, on Friday, the forecast included 10-20 mph winds on race day. Heat, humidity, and wind; weather-wise, this was a perfect storm for a triathlon.

Prior to coming to Madison, I had hoped to complete this race in 14 hours or less. As the weather forecast worsened, I knew that that would be impossible. I also knew that I would have to go slower on the bike and increase my intake of electrolytes and Gatorade in order to avoid a "Did Not Finish" (DNF)—the worst nightmare of an endurance athlete. You don't want to throw away a year's worth of training and preparation—to say nothing of the travel and expense—by failing to finish. It would be an entire year of disappointment, embarrassment and self-doubt before you could redeem yourself. I've never had a DNF, and hope I never do, especially in a race of this importance.

Exactly four years ago today

When I signed up for this race one year ago, it seemed eerie when I saw that the race date was September 11th. I'll never forget waking up at 7:45 a.m. on September 11, 2001, and seeing that one of the World Trade Center towers was on fire. Moments later, the second tower was hit, and it was clear that September 11th would be an infamous day in U.S. history. Prior to the race, I was hoping that September 11, 2005, would not be an infamous day for me. I couldn't help but think about that day four years ago as I tread water waiting for the race to start. I was kind of hoping they'd have a moment of silence before the race, but they didn't.

THE RACE

The Swim: Let the storm begin

The swim is the part of the race I was dreading the most. I can swim 2.4 miles, although it's incredibly boring and the amount of time it takes to complete it seems like an eternity. What I dreaded was the mass swim start—the first I've ever experienced. With 2,067 athletes starting all at once, getting hit by flailing arms and legs was going to be a certainty. And it was--for my entire swim. For one hour and nineteen minutes, triathlon was a contact sport. We should all have been wearing helmets and hockey pads.

If you're not mentally prepared for all of the contact during a mass swim start, it would be easy to panic, especially if you're in the middle of the pack. There's simply no way out. You have people all around you. People occasionally have panic attacks in such situations. If you stay out of the fray by taking a wider path, you'll avoid some of the contact, but your swim time will suffer. Next time, I'm going wide.

Prior to the race, I heard many people say that they were going to line up toward the back and to the right. I figured that, if that many people were going to be doing that, I would do the opposite and line up on the left, although still in the back. (The course ran counterclockwise, so being on the left side shortened the course a bit for you.) I looked around to find a pretty good starting spot, and hoped that I made the right decision.



The mass swim start. I'm probably near the yellow "X" in this sea of humanity. (ASI photo)

It was bedlam. Within seconds after starting, I was getting hit and kicked. I told myself not to panic, that contact was to be expected and not to take anything personally. In my previous triathlons, I also found that, within 15-20 minutes of the start, the "wave" I was in would spread out enough so that I'd have my own little spot to swim in with little or no further contact. I was hoping that this would be the case here as well. I just wanted to reach the end of the war zone and swim peaceably. But the war zone never ended. For me, it was a 1:19:03 slugfest. The worst parts were the corners on the course. Everyone swims close to the turn buoys, and those locations were like barroom brawls. In the first corner, I took one really good kick to my right quadriceps. Ouch! At every ensuing corner, I tried to protect my head from flailing arms and legs by using my own arms in a Muhammed Ali-style "rope-a-dope" position.

I have never been so glad to get out of the water. Surprisingly, my swim time was about a minute faster than both of my Ultramax swims. Maybe it was because I was able to "draft" off of those swimming in front of me. Or maybe it was because I was afraid to slow down and be pummeled to death by those swimming behind me.



Alive, but bruised, beaten and battered. (ASI photo)

I ran up the swim ramp, asked the volunteers pull off my wetsuit top, laid down on the carpeting so that they could strip off my wetsuit bottom, and then jogged up the parking garage “helix” to the transition area located on the fourth floor of the Monona Terrace. The spectators were incredible! They were cheering us all the way. Of course, I had to add some levity to the moment by hollering to the crowd, “Let’s all go to IHOP for breakfast!” It never fails to get a laugh.

One final word about mass swim starts. I can’t help but think that they’re a safety risk. I can see how an inadvertent kick to the head could cause a serious problem for a swimmer, especially if they’re deep in the pack and the safety personnel in boats or kayaks can’t see or get to them quickly. Even without contact, a swimmer suffering a heart attack would be in serious jeopardy. I doubt that mass swim starts will go away, however. Since everyone starts at the same time, one race clock is all that’s needed for everyone. A bigger reason, though, is that a mass swim start is truly a spectacle to behold for spectators and television viewers.

Swim time: 1:19:03 Position: 1,223 of 2,067 swim finishers; 37th in male 50-54 age group

Swim-to-bike transition

The toughest part about the swim-to-bike transition is that, after being horizontal for well over an hour, it’s kind of tough to run (due to equilibrium effects) and you’re soaking wet. Going from the bike to the run is comparatively easy. Biking after swimming, though, feels very strange and takes a little time to become physically and mentally adjusted to it. I was on the bike about 11 minutes after exiting the swim, which was probably not too far from the average for this race.



Thank God the 2,067 bikes are racked in numerical order because you'd never remember where you put yours. (ASI photo)

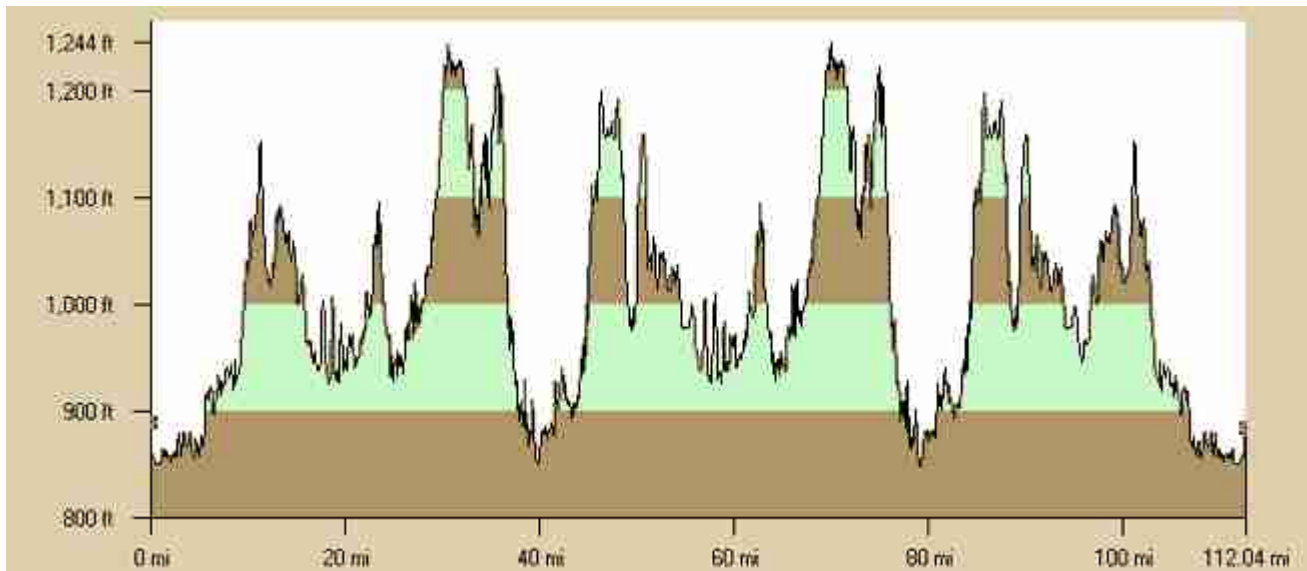
Transition time: 11:38

The bike: The storm heats up

The bike segment is usually the key to an Ironman race. Timewise, it's the longest segment, normally accounting for about 50% of one's finish time. But more importantly, it presages how the run will go. Go too fast on the bike for your level of aerobic conditioning, and your legs will be trashed for the run, turning the run into a nightmarish death march. Don't take in enough calories and liquids, and you may not even make it to the run.

The topography of the bike course is also a major factor. A hilly course requires far more energy to ride than a flatter course. It also favors younger and lighter riders. When triathletes talk to other triathletes about races, the question about hills on the bike course invariably comes up. Triathletes who live and train in flatter parts of the country sometimes shy away from races with hilly bike courses.

For reasons of time, I didn't drive the bike course before the race. However, I had a general idea as to what it was like. I downloaded maps of the course and the hill profile and studied them closely. I learned what sections of the course I would have to take easy so that I didn't blow up on the hills. However, no matter how much you read or talk to others about a bike course, there's no substitute for seeing it for yourself.



The hill profile of the bike course. This ain't Florida.

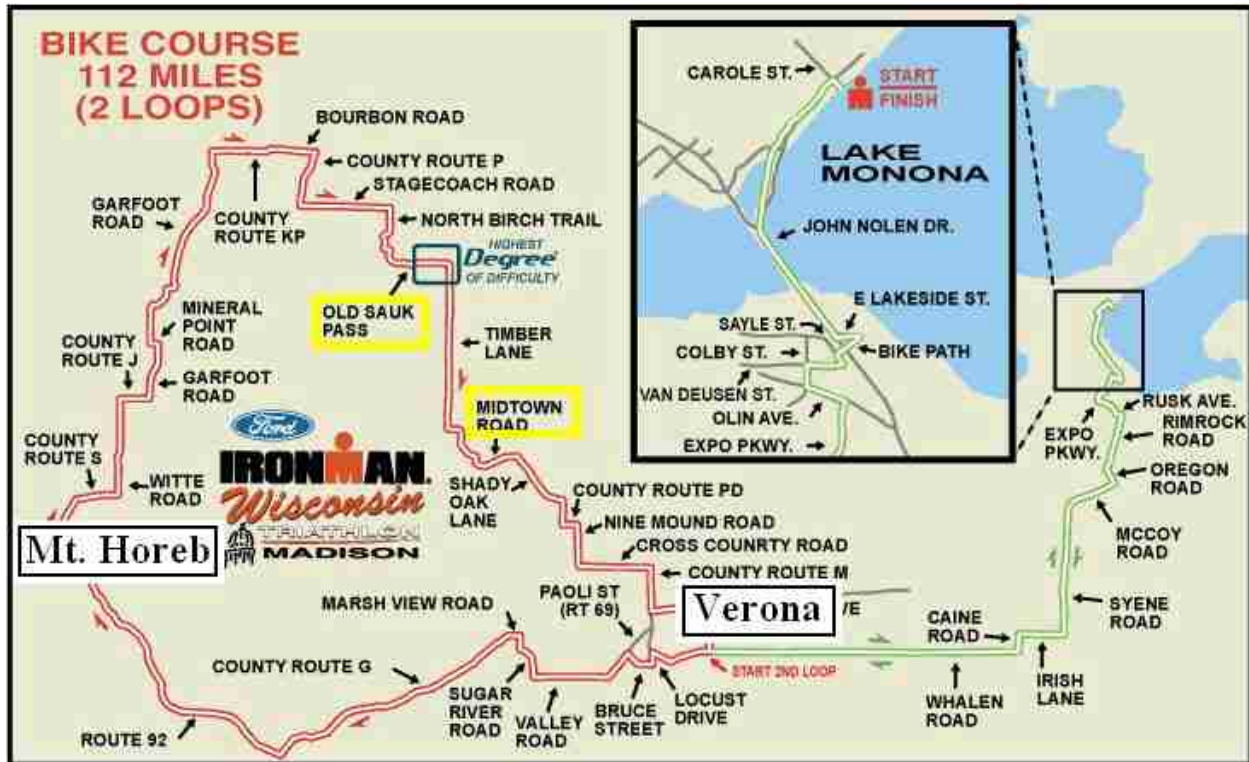
Fortunately, I live in an area with hills on which to train. Some of the hills on my usual bike ride at the Lake of the Ozarks are tougher than any of the hills I've ridden in any race. I felt fairly confident about my ability to handle the hills on the Ironman Wisconsin course.

My strategy for the bike was to go easy. I knew that the heat and wind later in the day would come back to haunt me if I pushed too hard. I also knew that I would have to pay very close attention to my nutrition and hydration needs under these conditions. My plan was to take two Endurolytes and a Lava Salt tablet per hour (a total of 455 mg. sodium and 80 mg. potassium). I also drank anywhere from 12 to 24 ounces of Gatorade (400-600 mg. sodium and 180-270 mg. potassium) per hour, and a similar quantity of water. The Gatorade provided about 100-150 calories per hour, and I consumed at least one energy gel (100 calories) per hour. (I ate a few bananas later on the bike course.) I didn't want to consume too many carbohydrates—especially from solid foods—because it would likely lead to stomach problems. (When exercising, your body is less able to digest food because the blood is being directed to your working muscles, not to your abdomen. It's even more pronounced in hot weather, as blood is directed to your skin to help cool the body.) There's nothing worse than riding or running with a painful, bloated stomach. I know. Been there, done that. Several times.

My nutrition and hydration strategy worked well, especially considering these weather and course conditions. About halfway through the bike course, I had to increase my electrolyte and Gatorade intake to ward off a sense that I was close to cramping, and it worked (along with slowing down my pace just a bit). I was thrilled that I never had stomach problems. (My bike segment at Ultramax last year was nearly seven hours of battling stomach pain, and that was no fun.) I learned that I don't need as many carbohydrates as I thought, and that I should stay away from solid food until later in the bike segment.

My pacing strategy also worked well. I decided that I would go very easy for the first hour or so and concentrate on getting hydrated (only with water for the first half hour). It was hard to hold back because I was being passed by literally hundreds of riders in that hour. I was only riding at

15 mph, which is pretty leisurely on the relatively flat, early part of the bike course, although there was a steady headwind. I figured that I'd better stick to my easy and steady strategy since I didn't know the course and because I'm not a fast cyclist. Also, I knew it would be a long, hard day and I would probably see some of these same people on the run.



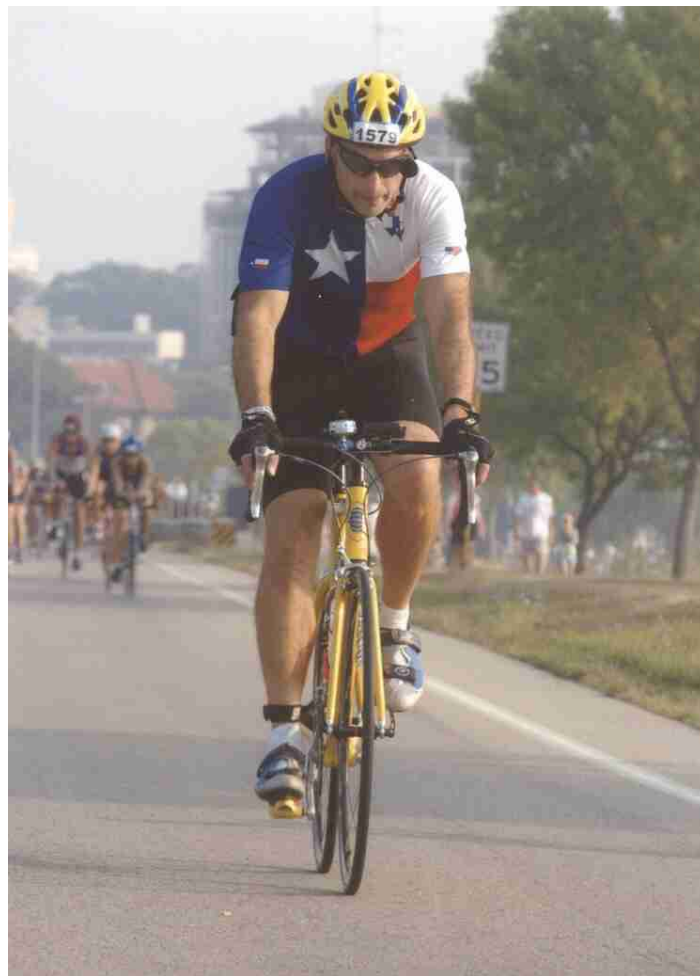
The bike course heads 18 miles southwest of Madison, then consists of two, 38-mile loops through mostly farming areas before returning to Madison. The two toughest hills occur at the 45- and 50-mile marks, and again at the 82- and 87-mile marks on the second loop. The first (Old Sauk Pass) is a long, gradual climb that I took very easy. The second (Midtown Road) is a shorter but steeper climb. The rest of the course was a mixture of flat areas and rolling hills. The roads were not in very good condition. I don't know if the extremely cold Wisconsin winters are to blame or the lack of maintenance. I've never raced on such poor roads. It felt so good to get on those all-too-short sections of the course with extremely smooth pavement.

The two hills that I mentioned above—Old Sauk Pass and Midtown Road—were each lined with hundreds of spectators. I had heard before the race that climbing these hills is reminiscent of the Tour de France, with spectators within a couple feet of you on each side, cheering and encouraging you up the hill. It was, and it was extraordinary. I've never seen anything like it. I saw a young lady dressed up like the Tour de France devil, complete with a devil's fork, "chasing" us up the hill. The support was amazing. As long as I live, I will never forget it. After getting past those two hills, I finally understood why Ironman Wisconsin is so special, and why triathletes rave about it.

A few miles later, the course runs through the city of Verona. Verona puts on a festival to coincide with Ironman Wisconsin, and puts out the welcome mat. It was unbelievable. Literally

thousands of spectators were there greeting and cheering us as we rode through the city. I heard my name and hometown announced over the loudspeaker system. I reached out my right hand toward the crowd behind the barricade for some “high fives”, and they responded (though I stayed away from actual contact for safety reasons). Also, I acknowledged them by ringing my bike bell. Combined with what I saw on the hills, this was one of the most incredible things I’ve ever seen. It makes me want to do this race again.

I wore my Texas state flag jersey during the bike segment. It’s really neat looking, and I can legitimately wear it because I lived in Texas for 15 years. I can’t count the number of times I heard people yell out, “Hey, Texas!” on the course. Some spectators expressed “thanks” for the University of Texas football team beating Ohio State—a big Wisconsin rival—the day before. A bunch of the racers had nice comments on my jersey. Of course, these were people passing me on the bike, so maybe they were just being nice. 😊



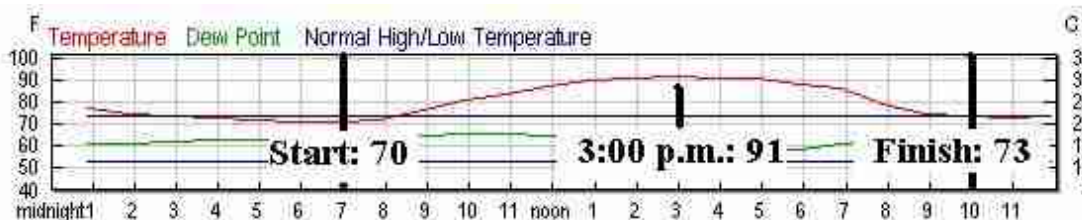
My Texas state flag jersey. The back says, “Don’t Mess With Texas”. (ASI photo)

OK, who turned up the heat?

Unless it’s extreme, heat is an insidious enemy on the bicycle. Because air—even warm air—is constantly flowing over your skin, you really don’t feel it. But the heat is nevertheless taking its

toll. You sweat more, although you may not know it because the sweat evaporates quickly in the high-tech fabrics used in cycling clothing. If you stop your bike, the extent of the heat quickly becomes apparent.

The air temperature started out mild on race morning. When I climbed on the bike at around 8:30 a.m., the temperature was about 73 degrees, which is quite comfortable. By noon, it had risen to 86 degrees, and it peaked at 91 degrees at 3:00 p.m. The humidity wasn't too oppressive (compared to what I experienced during training in the summer), but it was enough to feel it, and to take its quiet toll.



In the above graph, note that the normal high and low temperatures are 73 and 52 degrees, respectively. The day's actual low was within three degrees of the normal high.

The storm worsens: Who turned up the wind?

On the bike, wind can be your friend or enemy, depending on whether it's a tailwind or a headwind. On a looped bike course, you'll experience both. On the Ironman Wisconsin course, though, it worked against us much more than for us.

The winds were blowing from the south at 10 mph when I started the bike segment. They stayed like that until about 1:00 p.m., when they increased to a steady 13 mph, with gusts between 19 and 24 mph, until I finished the bike at about 5:15 p.m.

The problem with the wind was that it was a headwind on the toughest sections of the course, and a tailwind on the easiest. There's nothing more difficult on a bicycle than climbing hills directly into the wind, and that's what was happening too often. There were a few times when crosswinds required leaning against the wind to stay upright.

Mt. Horeb: Ground Zero

If there was a ground zero in this perfect storm, it was the small community of Mt. Horeb. Mt. Horeb was at mile 30 on the first loop, and at mile 67 on the second loop.

At the "special needs" bag area at mile 60—seven miles before Mt. Horeb—I noticed a few riders were off their bikes. That's pretty common at the bike special needs station, and I didn't think much of it. However, shortly thereafter, I saw a rider laying in the shade of a tree along the road. Then, a little farther down the road, another one. And another. When I reached Mt. Horeb, the aid station looked like a triage center following a natural disaster. The only thing missing was blood. There were dozens of racers off their bikes, and many were lying under the trees and the tents. I was stunned. I had never seen so many racers in obvious distress. I was

feeling pretty good at that point, but I worried that I may face a similar fate if I didn't stay on top of my fluids and electrolytes. I picked up a bottle of Gatorade and two bottles of water. (Since my bike only has two bottle cages, I had to put one bottle in my jersey pocket, but the additional bulk was worth the peace of mind of having an extra bottle.)

I don't like taking pleasure in other's problems, but I realized that many of these racers in distress at Mt. Horeb were probably among those who passed me up on the bike earlier in the race, so I was pleased that my slow and steady pacing strategy was paying dividends. However, I still had 45 miles to go on the bike, so it wasn't time to gloat. I had to be very careful or my day would end early, like theirs.

There's always one or two ambulance sirens heard on the race course in long triathlons or marathons. Even highly trained and very fit athletes run into physical trouble. But this was shocking. I've never heard so many ambulances. Between Mt. Horeb and the end of the second bike loop at mile 94, sirens were being heard every few miles. I saw still more racers lying under trees along the roadway dealing with cramps and dehydration. Some were motionless.

While slowly climbing Old Sauk Pass (the long, gradual hill) again at mile 82, my left calf muscle cramped. I had to get off the bike and walk the remainder of the hill. I wasn't alone. Nearly everyone else was walking it, too. I was concerned that this might be the beginning of the end for me, so I drank more Gatorade and took some electrolyte tablets. From that point on, I took the hills very, very carefully, often pushing my right pedal harder than the left since my right leg hadn't cramped on me. Fortunately, I made it back to Verona (mile 94) in good shape, and the final 18 miles back to Madison were great, because it was relatively flat, the wind was generally at my back, and I felt good about conquering the toughest parts of this course on a very difficult day. I even managed to pass a few people.

But the storm wasn't over yet.

Bike time: 7:47:04 Position: 1,615 of 1,873 bike finishers; 66th in male 50-54 age group

Bike-to-run transition

Climbing off a bicycle after having ridden it nonstop for nearly eight hours feels great. The feeling doesn't last too long in an iron-distance triathlon, though, because it's usually followed by the lowest of the emotional lows: realizing you now have to run 26.2 miles. Your legs ache, you're tired and you'd just like to eat some real food, go back to the hotel, and sleep.

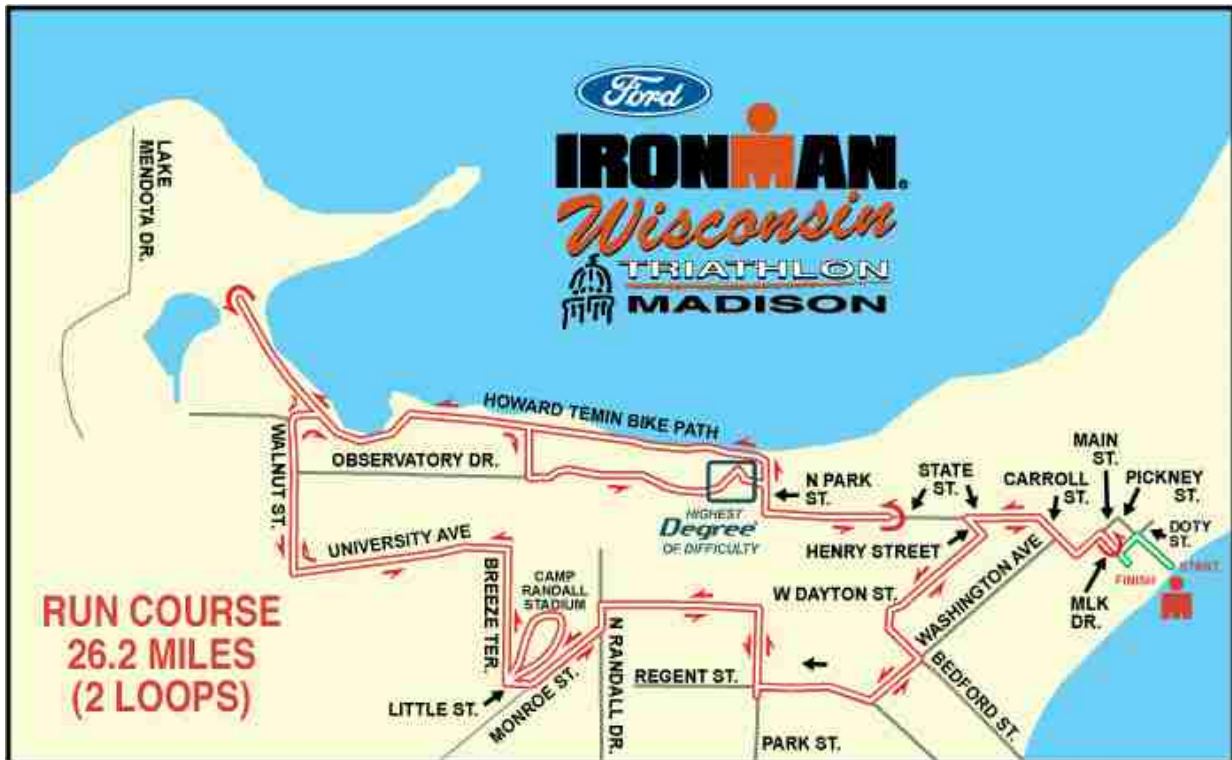
I must admit, though, that the emotional low this time wasn't as bad as during Ultramax. Maybe it was the fact that I was feeling pretty strong. Or maybe it was the huge crowd of spectators at the beginning of the run course. Whatever the reason(s), I wanted to get going and get to the finish line. When I left the transition area, the race clock read 9:30. I realized that running a 4:30 marathon to finish under 14 hours was not in the cards. (It took me 4 hours just to complete the Spirit of St. Louis Marathon in April, and both Ultramax marathons took a little over 5 hours.) My goal was now to finish in less than 15 hours, which meant finishing the marathon in under 5:30. I could do some walking and still make it, but not by much..

Before leaving the transition area, I used the porta-potty. It was the only time I urinated during the entire race. My guess is that I drank about eight bottles (or 1-1/2 gallons) of liquids while on the bike. That may not have been enough for these weather conditions, but I didn't have any symptoms (e.g. dizziness or lethargy) of dehydration.

Transition time: 12:23 (just a little slower than average)

The first half of the run: Survival mode

The run course is a two-loop course through downtown Madison and parts of the University of Wisconsin campus. It even includes running around the football field at UW's Camp Randall Stadium. (You don't see things like that very often!) The only bad news about the course is that the running surfaces were often in poor shape. There were stretches of gravel and dirt due to construction, and there were cracks and potholes in the roadway that made running in the dark somewhat treacherous.



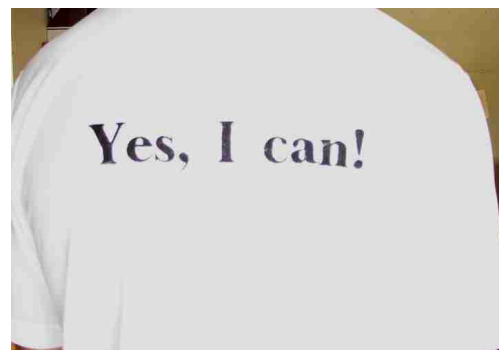
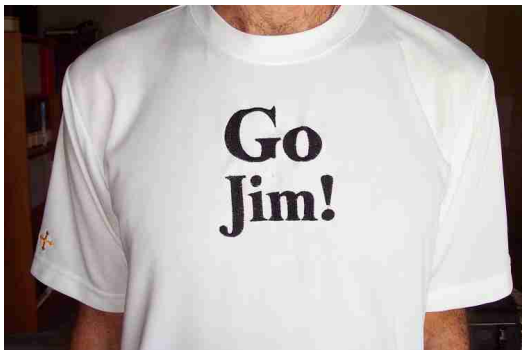
The run course. I've never seen a course with more turns (about 50 turns on each of the two loops).

The spectators were incredible. Race officials estimated that there were 50,000 of them along the course. They couldn't have been more supportive. The same is true for the volunteers at the aid stations. Most appeared to be college students, and they handed us everything we needed and encouraged us to keep going. One volunteer helping to direct us at a turn on the course was particularly noteworthy. She was in a wheelchair, and was a double leg amputee. When you see someone in that circumstance cheering you on, how can you not keep going?



Camp Randall Stadium. Home of the University of Wisconsin Badgers.

Just prior to Ultramax 2003, I took a plain white jersey to a local embroidery shop and had them embroider “Go Jim!” on the front and “Yes, I can!” on the back. I wore it on the run during both Ultramax races, and wore it again for Ironman Wisconsin. The only difference is that, during Ultramax, with relatively few spectators, I heard the crowd holler “Go Jim!” maybe a few dozen times, but during Ironman Wisconsin, with thousands and thousands of spectators, I heard “Go Jim!” so many times that I was (almost) tired of hearing it. I’m too polite to not acknowledge it when someone says “Go Jim”, so I always try to say “Thanks” in response. However, with so many people saying it along this course, and being too physically drained to say it to everyone, I stopped saying “Thanks” and just raised my hand and (weakly) waved to them. I hope they understood.



The first half of the run seemed like an eternity. It took me about 2:30 to finish it. I felt good about that because I was still on target for finishing under 15 hours. However, I knew that I was slowing down and walking more, so I would have to dig deep to keep pushing myself. I was exhausted and my legs felt like they were always on the edge of cramping, but I kept moving. Never once did I think of quitting. As John Collins, one of the finishers in the first Ironman in 1978 once said, “You can quit, but nobody else cares and only you will know.” I was going to get to that finish line even if I had to crawl.

I've found it's pointless to devise nutrition and hydration strategies for the run. You simply have no idea in advance what you might want at any given aid station. At one aid station, you might want some cola. At the next one, the thought of more cola might be sickening. You might want an orange slice at one aid station, and some pretzels at another. Basically, my strategy was to drink something at every aid station and eat something palatable whenever I could.

I religiously took my electrolyte tablets every hour. Without them, I'm not sure if I would have finished this race.

The air temperature was 90 degrees when I started the run, and was still 85 degrees when I reached the halfway point at 7:00 p.m. It was brutal. I brought an empty Gatorade bottle with me on the run, and filled it with ice and water at the aid stations. This allowed me to drink more steadily throughout the run (the aid stations were a mile apart) and to pour ice water over my head to try to keep cool. It worked well. I stayed pretty well hydrated and never cramped up.

The race personnel who design run courses are cruel b*****ds. They always seem to design two-loop courses, where the first loop ends with a clear view of the finish line. Just when you'd love to call it a day and run down the finish chute, a sadistic volunteer forces you to turn around and run another 13.1 miles. May they all burn in Hell.

The second half of the run: The storm turns painful

The second half of the run was painful. Excruciatingly so. The bottoms of my feet were on fire. To this day, I don't know if it was the hot pavement, thin socks, or what. All I know is that every step I took felt like I was stepping on burning coals. With my stride, running 13.1 miles requires about 20,000 steps. That's a lot of pain. It was awful. I didn't want to stop and massage my feet because my pace was slowing and I still wanted to break 15 hours. I became a clock-watcher. I kept calculating how fast I needed to go to meet my goal. I kept constant vigil for mile markers. They never came fast enough for me.

At the 14-mile mark, I asked a police officer working an intersection to take out his gun and shoot me. I guess he thought I was joking. He just laughed. Another cruel b*****d.

I passed literally hundreds of people on the run course, and not many passed me. My slow and steady pacing on the bike clearly paid off on the run, just as I had hoped.

I carried a disposable camera with me on the run. (I did this at Ultramax in 2003, and some of the resulting photos were priceless.) I took photos of the capitol building, the football stadium and some of the spectators along the course. The spectators always cooperated. Especially the pretty UW coeds. ☺



The spectators could not have been more supportive.

There were other moments of fun during the race. At the 15-mile mark, I became a victim of sexual harassment by one of the women racers. As I was coming up behind her, I overheard her telling the guy in front of her that he had a really nice rear end. As I was about to pass, I told her that I was reluctant to do so for fear of attracting similar unsavory remarks. That only encouraged her. I felt like a piece of meat. When I pulled well ahead of her, I stopped, pulled out my camera, and snapped a photo. Here she is:



#2186, Audrey Drake, Sun Prairie, Wisconsin

At around 9:00 p.m., with the race clock at 14:00, I passed the 22-mile mark. I started to feel more confident that I could break 15 hours, but I had to limit my walking as much as possible. Despite my burning feet and dead legs, I ran most of the remaining 4.2 miles, walking only at the aid stations and when I absolutely had to. I reached the 25-mile mark at about 14:35, and knew that I would meet my 15-hour goal unless something terrible happened. And if something terrible happened, I had 2:25 to crawl to the finish line and still be an official finisher.

Run time: 5:16:42 Position: 719 of 1,681 run finishers; 19th in male 50-54 age group

The finish line

When you come within a mile of the finish line, things change. You begin to hear the music and spectators in the distance. Adrenaline starts pumping. Your mind gradually stops dwelling on the pain and agony, and you run without any more walking or stopping at aid stations. Your sole focus becomes putting one foot in front of the other to get to the finish line.

When I ran past the final aid station on Carroll Street, across from the Capitol, I was within two blocks of the finish line. The music and spectators were getting louder and louder. I turned left onto Main Street and then made the very last turn onto Martin Luther King Blvd. Then I finally saw what I wanted to see for the last 15 hours, and for the last year: the finish line. There it was, just 100 yards away. I pulled out my disposable camera, stopped very briefly and took pictures of the spectators to my left and right.

The last 100 yards go by very quickly. There's no walking here. EVERYBODY runs down the finish chute. While it goes by quickly, it's one of the most memorable things you will ever experience. The music is blaring ("You Shook Me All Night Long" by AC/DC was playing as I crossed the line), the announcer (Tom Ziebart) announces your name and hometown, and the hundreds of spectators in portable bleachers on both sides of the finish chute are cheering like crazy. I reached out my hand for some "high fives" from the spectators on the right, and then ran over to the left side for some more. I hollered out a celebratory "Woo!" as loud as I could, looked upward, stretched my right hand up toward the sky and gave a thumbs-up, and then raised both arms high as I broke through the finish tape that the volunteers had stretched across the finish line in front of me. Just as I had experienced with my two Ultramax finishes, it's the most extraordinary feeling of accomplishment. I had done it. I was now a three-time Ironman finisher.



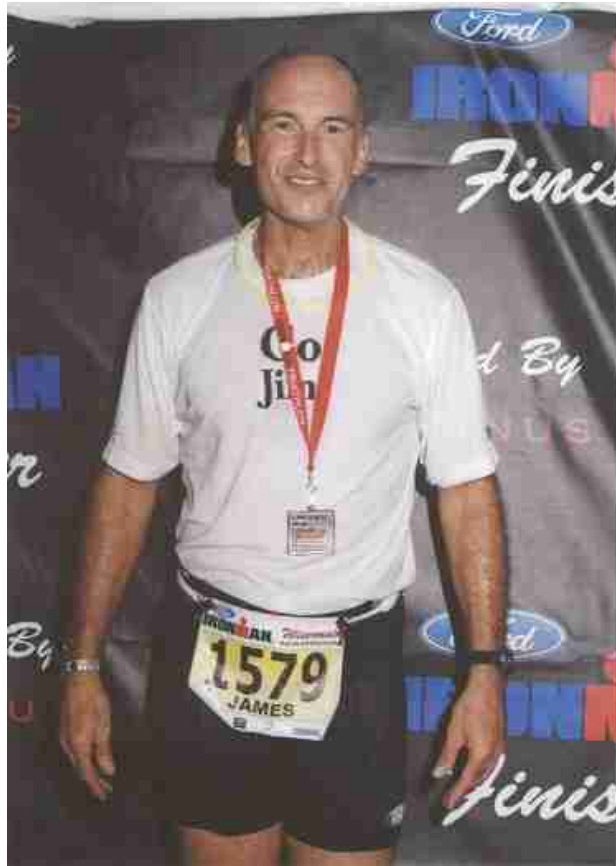
I DID IT! (ASI photo)

Finish time: 14:46:49 Position: 1153 of 1681 finishers; 39 of 92 male 50-54 age group finishers

The finish line area

After crossing the finish line, a volunteer put on my finisher's medal, and another removed the computer timing chip that was strapped to my ankle.

Ironman races always have volunteer "catchers" just beyond the finish line. Two volunteers, one on each side of you, come up to greet and help you. I pride myself on self-sufficiency and don't ask for assistance from volunteers after a race, but this time, I welcomed the assistance. I leaned on the two volunteers who came up to me. As we walked through the finish line area, they asked me if I was OK (I told them I was), asked me what size shirt I wear (they then brought me the correct-sized finisher's shirt), put around me an aluminum foil "space blanket" to help keep me warm, walked me over to the table with water and Gatorade, and then pointed me to the spot where "candid" photos were being taken of finishers with their medals. I had my picture taken (I look terrible) and headed for the food tent.



Stick a fork in me. I'm done. (ASI photo)

Food, recovery and packing

For the first time since 4:00 a.m., I ate some real food: hot dogs, potato chips and soda. Three hot dogs and three sodas, in fact. After eating little but those yucky, vanilla-flavored energy gels all day long, those hot dogs tasted like the best thing I had ever eaten in my lifetime.

I was understandably tired, but I felt surprisingly well. Lots of people were taken straight to the medical tent after the race. I'm glad I was in relatively good shape if for no reason other than, if I was sick or injured, there was nobody with me to pick up my bags and bike, which had to be done before midnight.

I walked into Monona Terrace and changed into the street clothes that I was wearing when I arrived at the race site in the morning. I then picked up my transition bags and took them to my truck, which was parked about three blocks away. I made a second trip back to the Terrace to get my bike, and took that to the truck as well. Again, thank God I was in good enough shape to do all this by myself.

Watching the final finishers cross

There is nothing in the world like watching people finish an Ironman Triathlon in person. It's the most inspiring thing you will ever see. Ordinary men and women of a wide range of ages and sizes are achieving something extraordinary in their lives, and throngs of cheering families, friends and spectators are there to congratulate them.



*Final hour finishers. They're as ecstatic as the nearly 1,500 who finished before them.
You'll rarely see such a display of raw human emotion in your lifetime.*

I was glad that I had the time and energy to go back and see the final finishers. I climbed onto the portable bleachers and watched everyone who finished between 16 hours and the official end of the race at 17 hours (12:00 midnight). I joined in the cheering as dozens of people finished in that final hour.

The Ironman organizers do a phenomenal job in creating an exciting finish line. The music, the lighting, the announcers, the tossing of free gifts to the crowd, the Jumbotron TV screen, the portable bleachers, etc., all help to create it. Yes, it may be hype, but it helps makes these events so special.

How special? Well, special enough that Ironman Triathlon finish lines always seem to feature at least one marriage proposal being made, and this race was no exception.





It looks like she said “yes”. Congratulations to #805, Darrell Haas of Middleton, Wisconsin, and his bride-to-be. (ASI photos)

The last official finisher, Melissa Lindsey from St. Cloud, Minnesota, crossed the line at 16:56:31. Seventy-six year-old Ironman legend Frank Farrar finished four minutes past the official cut-off time. The announcer asked Frank to walk down the finishers’ chute anyway, which he did to enormous applause.

The event came to an end and, within minutes, the spectators were mostly gone. It was sad to see it all end.

Monday

By the time I returned to the hotel, unpacked the truck, took a shower and hung my wetsuit and wet clothes from the shower rod to dry, it was past 2:00 a.m. I went down to use the computer in the hotel lobby to check for e-mail messages (there was one with the subject line “YOU DID IT!!!!!!!!!!!!”) and the race results. I wanted to relax in the indoor swimming pool, but the night clerk said that, unfortunately, she had just “shocked” it and that it couldn’t be used. Oh, well.

As I learned from my two Ultramax races, I knew that I wasn’t going to get much sleep. (The discomfort in my legs and the caffeine in the soda that I drank at the aid stations and after the race would prevent it.) I got up at 7:00 a.m., ate breakfast and headed to the Monona Terrace for the awards ceremony and other activities.

Like just about everything associated with Ironman Wisconsin, the awards ceremony was a first-class event. They fed us brunch, handed out the awards to the winners, showed three videos and featured presentations by the president of Ironman North America and a spokeswoman for the Janus Charity Challenge.

It wasn’t until the awards ceremony that I learned just how bad a day it was for the athletes. It turns out that, of the 2,067 athletes who started the race, 389 (about 19%) failed to finish. According to the results posted online, about 200 failed to finish the bike segment, and nearly 200 more failed to finish the run. They said it was the highest rate of attrition in Ironman history. I felt very lucky to have weathered this storm.

At around 2:00 p.m., the awards ceremony ended, and Ironman Wisconsin 2005 was history.

Registration for the 2006 race began at 9:00 a.m. By noon, nearly 2,000 entries had been submitted. By 5:00 p.m., the race was sold out. I decided not to return in 2006 but, God willing, I hope to do this race again.

The rest of the day was spent relaxing and getting ready to leave Madison on Tuesday morning. I left Madison at 8:00 a.m. with my finisher's medal safely packed away.

Ironman Wisconsin was an extraordinary experience that I'll never forget.

A final thought

An Ironman triathlon is not about swimming, cycling and running, nor is it about what you do on one long, grueling day. Ironman is about goal-setting, determination, commitment and perseverance in achieving something seemingly impossible. At times, I've wondered if it's worth the great sacrifices of time and energy over many days, weeks and months. But breaking that finish tape stretched across the road 140.6 miles away clears up any doubt. It is. Every time.

Thanks for reading!

Jim Glickert
Osage Beach, Missouri
September 26, 2005

