



Redman Triathlon Race Report Oklahoma City, Oklahoma September 20, 2008

Common to every iron-distance triathlon I've done is the passion that the race organizers have for providing an experience worthy of all the training that a race of that distance (2.4-mile swim; 112-mile bike; 26.2-mile run) requires. I've never been even remotely disappointed with my experience at any of the seven I've done.

Every iron-distance triathlon also has a certain uniqueness about it. Ironman Wisconsin is a huge event, with thousands of participants and tens of thousands of enthusiastic (and sometimes entertaining) spectators to cheer you on to a finish line experience that is almost magical. You can be as slow as molasses, but the spectators will still make you feel like a superstar.

The Silverman Triathlon has an incredibly beautiful and extraordinarily challenging bike course through the Black Mountains of the Lake Mead National Recreation Area in southern Nevada. If there's an iron-distance triathlon more difficult than Silverman, count me out. The challenge is the greatest I've ever experienced, and so is the satisfaction of crossing the Silverman finish line.

The Redman Triathlon in Oklahoma City is uniquely understated and unpretentious compared to others, but it's still a great event, organized by some of the most passionate triathletes you'll ever meet. I had a chance to meet them, and will share more about them later in this report.

This was Redman's fourth year. Making it to four years is an accomplishment in itself. Iron-distance triathlons are expensive and extremely difficult to organize. Ironman-brand events are hard to compete with for participants, and have helped lead to the demise of a number of independent iron-distance races (e.g. Ultramax, Duke Blue Devil, Great Columbian). There's no doubt in my mind that the dedication of the Redman staff is the reason for the success of this race. It'll be gaining more stature in 2009 (as I'll mention later), and that bodes well for its future success and longevity.

This was my second trip to Redman. I did it in 2006, and loved it. There are two things in particular about Redman that appeal to me. First, you don't have to register for it a year in advance like Ironman-brand events. A lot of things—injuries, illness, loss of motivation, life's complications, etc.—can come up in the twelve months between registering for an Ironman and the race itself, and the \$525 registration fee is a pretty big wager that nothing bad is going to crop up before race day. Second, Oklahoma City isn't that far from my home in central Missouri. It's a relatively easy seven-hour trip each way on excellent highways.

After doing two iron-distance triathlons in 2007—Ironman Wisconsin in September and Silverman in November—I didn't want to commit to doing another one until I was sure I wanted to do so. I registered for Redman in late July. My training wasn't all that great up until then, but I still wanted to do the race. When doing an iron-distance race is something you've done every year for five years, it's hard to stop unless there's some compelling reason not to. Plus, it gets to be a big part of your life and self-identity. Finally, for those of us older age-groupers (I'm 53), there's also a fear that, if you intentionally skip a year, you may never come back and do another Ironman. That wouldn't be the end of the world, but it would be an admission that you're old, or at least getting older. Yes, vanity plays a role, too.

Training

As I just mentioned, my training wasn't what I had hoped it would be this year. But then, it's been in a downward trend for years. As shown in the table below, this year I put in the fewest training miles and hours of the six years I've been doing triathlons. I put in just about half the hours I did in each of 2003 and 2004.

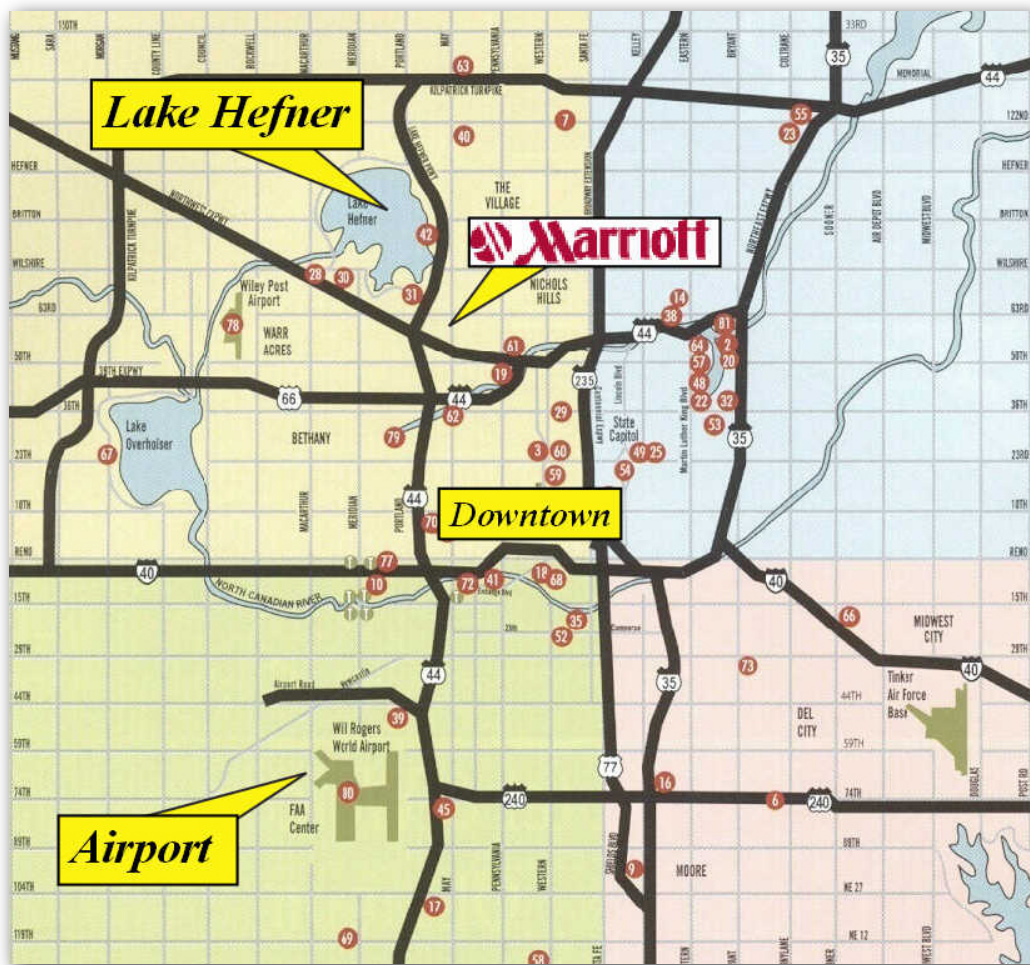
12 mos. ending September 30	Swimming (yards)	Bike (miles)	Run (miles)	Total training hours
2003	141,100	3,412	957	384
2004	155,100	3,462	797	395
2005	183,700	2,265	883	326
2006	97,600	2,160	789	298
2007	82,600	1,958	565	257
2008	80,300	1,319	559	215

Strangely enough, my lower training volumes have not translated at all in lower finish times. While there are lots of variables (e.g. weather, course difficulty) from one race to another, I'm pretty consistently finishing these races in about 14 hours.

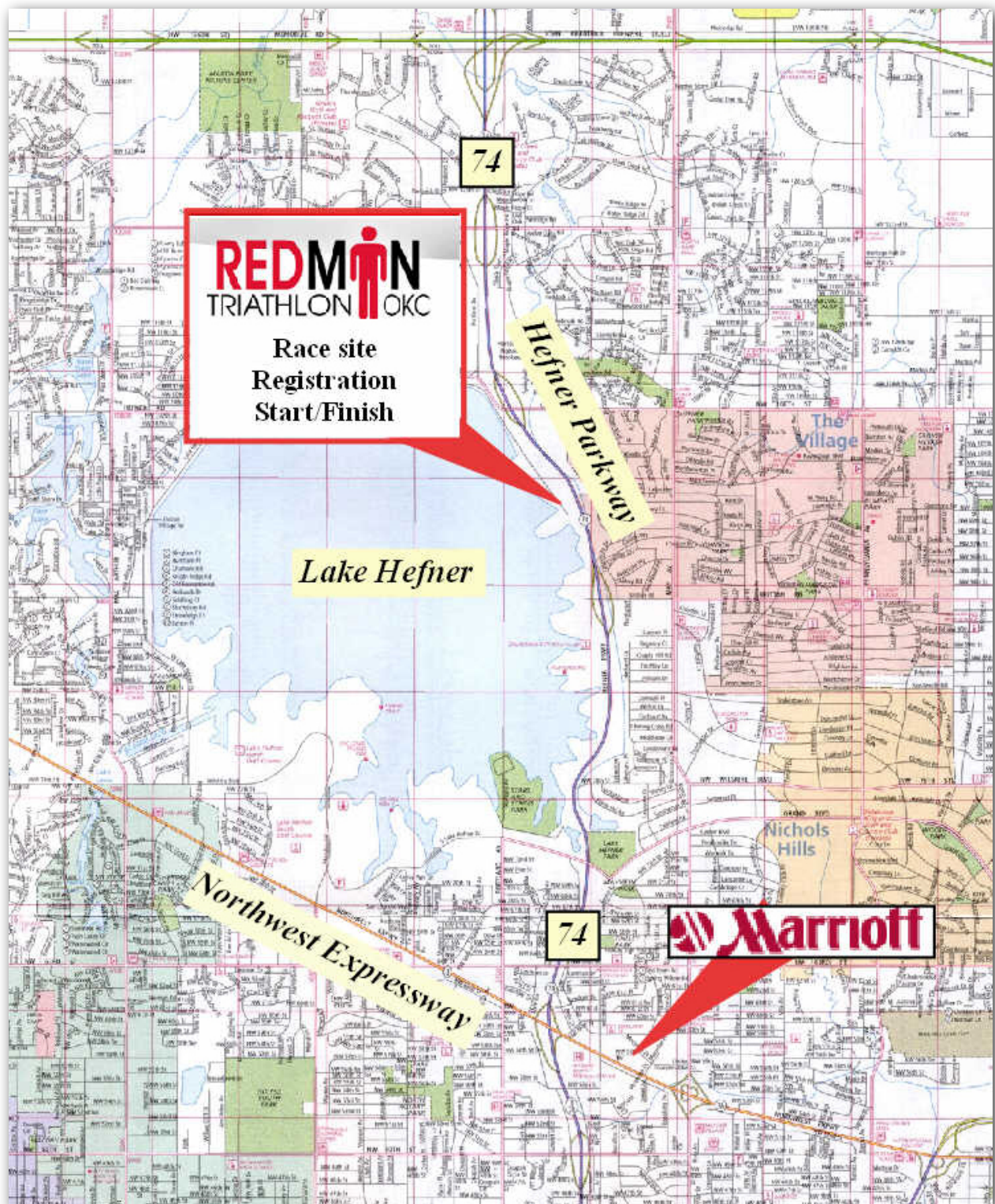
I didn't have very high expectations for myself at Redman. I thought that my training was inadequate, and that finishing in under 14 hours wouldn't be possible. My goal was simply to finish in decent shape.

The days before the race

Everything went smoothly in the days before the race. The drive to Oklahoma City was uneventful, the weather was great and I was feeling fine and rested. The host hotel, the Oklahoma City Marriott, is a beautiful, comfortable hotel. (OK, there were some elevator problems at times, but that wasn't a big deal.) The hotel is just a short drive to Lake Hefner, where the race starts and ends.



If you're coming to Oklahoma City for Redman, these are the key places of interest.



One thing you'll appreciate with Redman is the convenience. The Oklahoma City Marriott is a few minutes away from Lake Hefner, and located along Northwest Expressway is just about anything you could need while here.

Registration is held at Lake Hefner. I hate to talk about swag—I'd do these races even if I received nothing. But, I came home with a race t-shirt, a very nice, embroidered laptop computer bag, a hat, water bottle and sundry items. I felt like a thief for taking them.



Redman offers great swag.

The pre-race meeting was held at the race site at Lake Hefner at 6:00 p.m. Friday night. At the meeting, they asked for a show of hands from those who were making Redman their first half or full iron-distance triathlon. I was stunned by the response. Even though this was Redman's fourth year, a clear majority—almost an even overwhelming majority—were first-timers. It's great to be part of an event where so many people are trying to fulfill a lofty personal goal.

I don't know exactly how many participants registered for Redman, but there were 115 iron-distance finishers and 318 half-iron finishers. Redman also offered relay and aquabike divisions. All told, there were approximately 500 participants. From a racer's perspective, that's a good size. It's enough to make you feel like you're part of a big event, yet not enough to make it impersonal like an Ironman-brand event. At Redman, you can walk up to the race director and ask him a question. At Ironman Wisconsin, you can't find the race director.



Scenes from the race site the day before the race. Pictured on the left is the red-carpeted finish chute, with bleachers on one side and the Red Bull announcer's tent on the other. Pictured on the right is the inflatable slide for the kids to play on during race day. It looked like they would be having more fun than us on race day. I was jealous.

Race day—Saturday, September 20th

Mid to late September provides some of the nicest, most reliable weather in the Midwest and Southwest. But, there are no guarantees. The remnants of Hurricane Ike came through parts of the Midwest (after devastating southeast Texas) one week before Redman and caused major flooding and wind damage.

Wind is common in Oklahoma. If you don't believe me, take a hint from all the sailboats at the marinas on Lake Hefner. Lake Hefner is wide open (three miles wide and long), so there's nothing to block the wind from creating rough water. Two years ago, the wind made the Redman swim and bike a nightmare. The afternoon winds that day made miles 56–84 of the bike course (featuring a constant headwind) some of the most difficult and painful I've encountered in a triathlon.

This year, the weather forecast looked outstanding—sunny skies, morning low in the mid 50s, afternoon high in the mid 70s, with light winds. When the race started, the temperature was 57 degrees, the sky was clear and there was no wind. It was a perfect start to a long day.

The swim



The iron-distance swim course was two counterclockwise loops in the northeast corner of the lake. It was vastly better than 2006, when the course ran due east-west from the start location, and the rising sun made it nearly impossible to sight the buoys that were directly in line with it on the eastbound legs. I can only assume that this year's course was also more spectator friendly. (Sorry, I wasn't in a position to see for myself. :))

Lake Hefner is a source of Oklahoma City's water supply, so it's very clean. The water temperature was 76 degrees—wetsuit legal, and perfect for a long swim. I intended to use my sleeveless wetsuit top, but mistakenly put the long-sleeve one in my gear bag. By the time I realized my mistake, it was too late to go back for the other one. Nevertheless, it turned out fine.

After the singing of the national anthem and other pre-race festivities, the gun went off promptly at 7:15 a.m. for the iron-distance participants. (The half-iron participants started later, in waves.) There were about 120 of us, so there wasn't much congestion after the first few hundred yards. There was very little contact with other swimmers. That's another benefit of a smaller race.

In the days before the race, I was dreading the swim, as I usually do. I never feel that I've done enough swim training to have confidence that it will go well, and that was more true this year than any other. Going into the race, I was simply hoping that I'd make it to the end with no problems.

It's strange how, once you get a few hundred yards into the swim, you pretty much stay with the same people around you for the remainder. Early on, there was one young lady in particular whom I noticed was always a few yards away from me on my right side. I was breathing to my right, and she was breathing to her left, so I was able to keep track of her and use her as an additional navigational aid. We stayed together all the way to the end. I also found a few people in our same "group" whom I was able to draft off of for quite a while—the first time I've ever been successful at that during a triathlon.

I finished the swim in 1:19:29. By about one minute, it was my best iron-distance swim ever. But more so than the finish time, the swim just seemed to go extremely well for me. I had no problems whatsoever (not even a leak in my goggles), and I felt great when I was done. It made me want to kick myself for all those pre-race jitters about how my swim would go.

My swim-to-bike transition time was 7:09. I worked quickly and methodically, but wasn't rushing. There was no reason to. There was still a long, long day ahead of me.

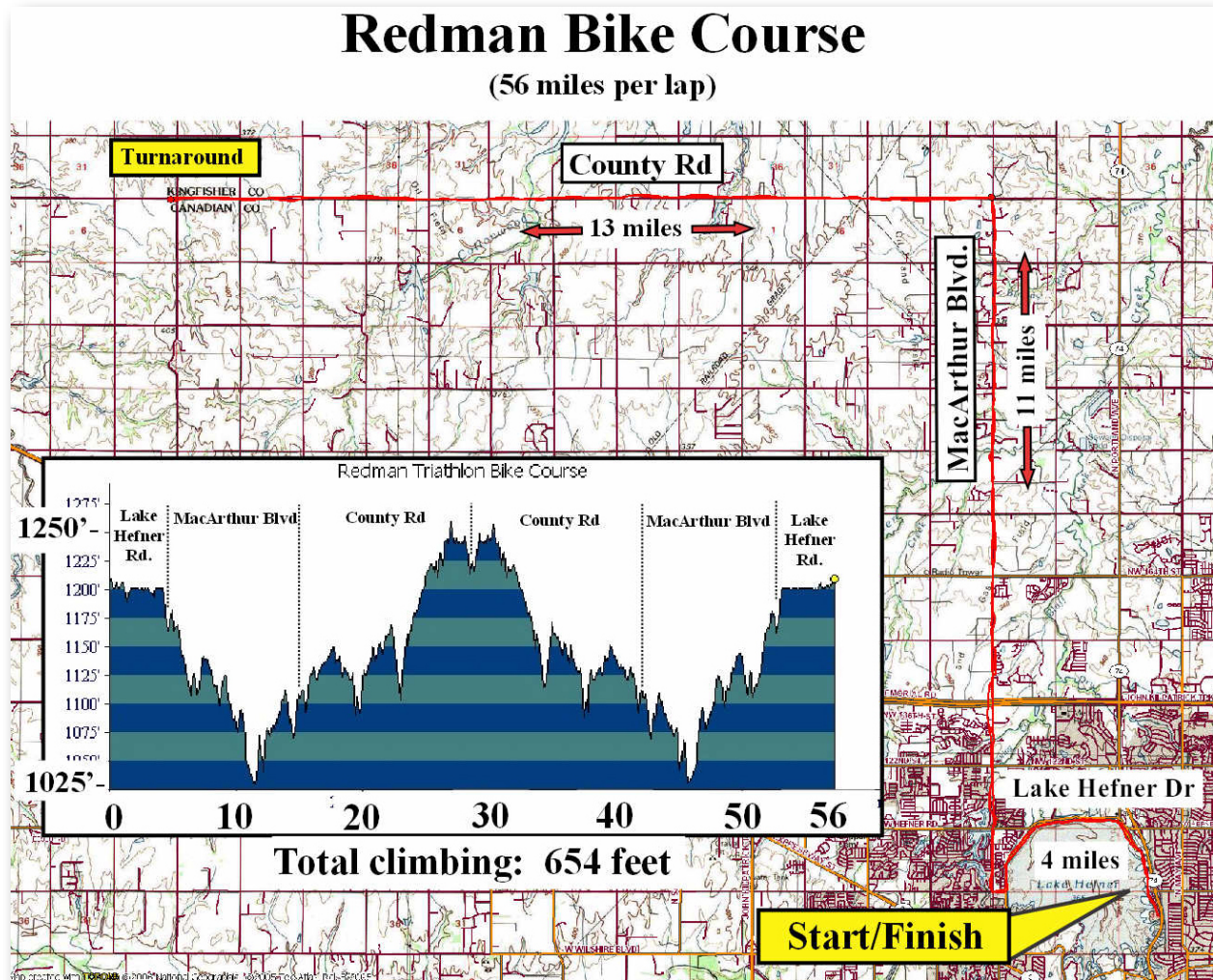
The bike

I began the bike segment on an emotional high. I knew I was already 15 minutes ahead of where I was in 2006, when I finished the swim in a horribly slow 1:35:46 (thanks to rough water), and the entire race in 13:45:20. Despite being two years older and having trained much less this year, I started having dreams of beating my 2006 Redman finish time, and maybe even my personal best of 13:37:16 at Ultramax 2004. As I mentioned earlier, I didn't have very high expectations going into this race. But, suddenly, I was a man on a mission: I was going for a personal best.

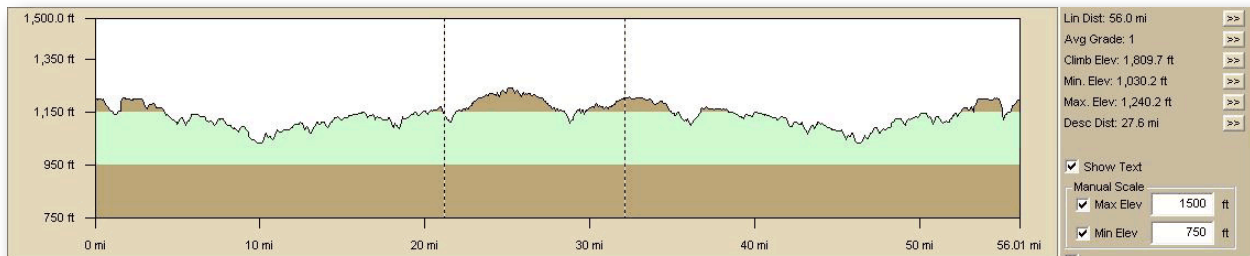


The Redman transition area. Compared to big events like Ironman Wisconsin, the space available around your bike is downright roomy.

The two-loop Redman iron-distance bike course consists almost entirely of gradual, rolling hills. However, rarely will you find anything steeper than, say, a typical highway exit ramp. The only truly flat section is Lake Hefner Drive, which runs right along the lake's shoreline.

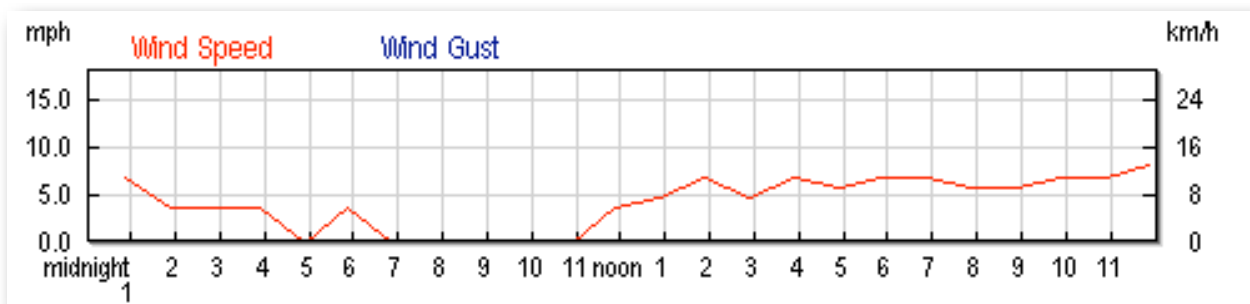


My National Geographic TOPO! software calculated 654 feet of total climbing on the 56-mile loop. Don't ask me why, but the DeLorme graphic on the next page (from Redman's website) shows 1,810 feet of climbing. I can only guess that DeLorme uses many more elevation sample points in its calculations, but that still wouldn't seem to explain such a big difference. Personally, based on my experience at Ironman Wisconsin and Silverman, I can't believe that there's anywhere near 3,620 feet of climbing on this 112-mile course, no matter how you calculate it.



A few miles of the course are on roads completely closed to vehicular traffic. Another few miles are on a single, protected lane of four-lane MacArthur Boulevard. The remainder of the course is open to traffic. The volume of traffic diminishes as you get to the turnaround far from the city. Motorists are warned that there are cyclists on the road, but you still need to be cautious.

I pushed myself reasonably hard and stayed on top of my nutrition and hydration. The weather was near perfect for an attempt at a personal best. There was a 5–8 mph southeast wind that started around noon and lasted the rest of the day, but it was never really an issue. When I arrived back at Lake Hefner around noon to begin my second lap of the bike course, the water was absolutely still. I could hardly believe it. It was a stark contrast from two years ago.



I rode virtually the entire course in my big gear (53 teeth) up front, and my smaller gears in back. My cassette is a 12–27. An 11–23 would be ideal. I only got off the seat to stretch my legs or to gain a little more speed on a few hills.

Everything was going great on the bike for me. That is, until mile 85. I had just rounded the turnaround at the far end of the course and entered the infamous chip and seal section on County Road. Suddenly, the side of my right knee started hurting. I attributed it to pushing the pedals harder than normal in order to regain some speed, which had dropped due to the rolling resistance of the rough road surface. I was guessing at that moment that I had strained a tendon or my iliotibial band (ITB). The pain wasn't severe, but it stayed with me through the end of the bike course. It didn't affect my speed, only because I just kept pushing through it. I was still focused on a personal best finish time.

A few words about the road surfaces

There is only one thing I don't like about Redman, and it's the poor quality of some of the roads on the bike course. Don't get me wrong: Some of the surfaces are excellent, and most are good or fair, but a few of them are plain lousy. You'll come across spots where the asphalt is cracked, or a pothole has been filled but not smoothed over. In addition, there's a four-mile section (you'll ride it four times in the full distance course) of a chip-and-seal surface near the westernmost end of County Road that feels like you're riding on gravel.

To try to quantify the road surface conditions, of the 28 miles to the turnaround (you'll experience each of these four times in the full iron distance):

- 4 miles Excellent; nice, smooth asphalt
- 6 miles Pretty good
- 6 miles Good, but watch out for cracks
- 8 miles Fair; relatively smooth chip-and-seal, but watch for occasional cracks, bumps and disintegrating pavement edge
- 4 miles Poor; very rough chip-and-seal surface (but no potholes)

I was hoping that the roads would be much improved from 2006, when there were lots of potholes and bad road edges. They were definitely better this year, but still left something to be desired.

Please don't blame the race organizers. They can and do beg and plead for improvements, but let's face it: one-day triathlons don't generate enough tax revenue for local governments to justify maintaining smooth roads. In addition, some of these roads are traveled by very heavy farm machinery and industrial vehicles, so maintaining the roads is a big, expensive challenge.

Here are a few words of advice. Think twice about using very light or expensive race tires. Also, there are bumps in the road that, hit too hard, can easily send your bottles flying. Do a once-over on your bike before the race to make sure nothing's loose. Keep your eyes on the surfaces just ahead of you. The organizers paint warning circles or messages on the pavement, but you still need to be vigilant. Finally, don't let the bad surfaces get you down mentally. Just expect them. Hey, it's an iron-distance triathlon—it's not supposed to be easy!

I finished the bike segment in 6:49:08—my fastest iron-distance bike split by a little over ten minutes. Needless to say, after a great swim and an even better bike, I was thrilled. After a 10:40 bike-to-run transition time, I began the marathon with the race clock at around 8:20:00. I knew that if I could do a marathon in 5 hours—my fastest in an iron-distance triathlon was 4:53:40 on this very course in 2006—I would achieve a personal best. At the very least, I had 5:40:00 to still break 14 hours—a finish time I would have been pleased with before arriving in Oklahoma City.

The only question was whether my aching knee would cooperate.

The run

The Redman iron-distance run course is two, out-and-back loops on a flat, paved walking and biking path in Hefner Park. It's very nice, and often scenic as it runs along the lake shoreline. There's some, but not much shade.

I struggled badly through the first half of the marathon. My knee was hurting, but I was more affected by the weather. I started the marathon at around 3:45 p.m. The temperature at that time was the day's high of 81 degrees, which is pretty warm for running. The sun was beating down on me, which made it even more difficult. As a result, I was fighting dehydration the entire first loop, and my pace was slowing to a point where I realized my chances of a personal best were slipping away. I reached the halfway point at 11:12:00 race time, meaning that the first half had taken me just under 3 hours to complete. It was dreadfully slow.

Between the knee pain, the battle against dehydration, and seeing a great race going down the tubes, I was a bit dejected when I started the second loop. I don't know if it was apparent on my face, but, seemingly out of nowhere, a volunteer at the run special-needs tent started walking with me and giving me words of encouragement. He walked with me for about a half mile. I was hydrating myself as we went along, and I started feeling much better, both physically and mentally. He headed back to his post after I thanked him profusely for his support. (I thanked him again after reaching the finish line, and yet again at the awards ceremony the next morning.) His name is Phillip Vanlandingham. I didn't see any wings on him, but he sure helped me when I needed it. If you're reading this, thanks again, Phillip.

Shortly after leaving Phillip behind, I met Kenny Teague of Dripping Springs, Texas. Kenny was in my (male 50–54) age group. He had been behind me in the race up until that point, but looked strong as he came up to me. He started walking with me and we chatted. He mentioned among other things that this was his first iron-distance race.

Kenny and I ran together for awhile before I started walking again. I told him to keep going. There was no way I could keep up, and I didn't want to slow him down. I wasn't competing with him at all. At this point, I was only competing against the clock.



I alternated between running and walking, as best I could with a sore knee. Going from a walk to a run was especially painful. I would often see Kenny at a distance ahead of me, and use that as additional motivation to keep pushing myself. Kenny would occasionally walk, and I caught up to him several times.

At the 17-mile mark of the marathon, with the race clock nearing 12:00:00, I caught up to Kenny once again and told him that if we averaged 12-minute miles, we could finish in under 14 hours, with a little time to spare. I also told him a 12-minute per mile pace would even allow a little bit of walking, as I've learned from experience at previous races. With no longer a chance of a personal best, finishing in under 14 hours became my goal. I was checking my watch every few minutes to make sure I was on track.

Kenny would continue to go ahead of me at times—often enough to get out of my sight on the winding parts of the course—only for me to again catch him. But still, I wasn't racing him. I couldn't do anything more than I was doing. I was hurting and didn't have much left physically.

At mile 24, with the race clock at around 13:30:00–13:35:00, I reached Kenny one more time. He was walking in the dark, and didn't hear me approaching from behind. When I spoke up to ask how he was doing, he was startled and nearly jumped out of his shoes. I apologized for that. I told him we needed to get moving if we were going to break 14 hours. I continued running, and he resumed running behind me. At this point, all I could think of was the finish line and the time clock. I was running with everything I had left in me. I had no idea if Kenny was close behind or not. Not once did I look back. In all honesty, I was hoping that I was motivating him to dig deep and find enough strength to pass me and finish ahead of me. He deserved it. For a first-time iron-distance race at the age of 53, he was doing outstanding.

The adrenaline kicked in as I was getting nearer to the finish line area and the music and race announcer were getting louder. I was running strong and feeling no pain. (I love the adrenaline rush!) I reached the red-carpeted, picket-fence-lined finish chute, started screaming my "WOO-HOOs!" and "I DID ITs!", reached out for high-fives from the spectators (including all the good-looking babes from the Columbia (Missouri) Multisport Club who saw me earlier on the course and recognized the socks I was wearing), and then crossed the finish line. The time clock read "13:53:09". I did it.

No, I didn't set a personal best, but that's OK. I reached the finish line after doing the best I could all day, and in the end that's all that really matters to me.

Kenny finished shortly thereafter, in 13:55:25. He spotted me sitting down in the finish line area, and came over, ecstatic, with a huge smile on his face. I congratulated him and told him how I really wanted him to finish ahead of me. He said he was trying, but couldn't keep up. At least he, too, finished in less than 14 hours. Good job, Kenny! You are an Ironman!

For the record, I finished the marathon in 5:26:44. My finish time of 13:53:09 was 6th out of the 13 finishers in my age group, and 69th of all 115 finishers. The average finish time of all finishers was 13:35:23.



I DID IT!

And I did it wearing my lucky "Go Jim!" jersey, which I've only worn seven times—during each of my seven iron-distance finishes.



Postscript on training

I mentioned several times earlier in this report that I didn't do as much training this year as I had hoped. After Redman, I looked back at my annual training volumes over the six seasons that I've been doing triathlons, and noticed that my training volume and iron-distance finish time bore little correlation. I've been putting in far fewer training hours and miles in recent years, yet my finish times haven't gone up. (For example, I finished this year's Redman just 8 minutes slower than 2006, yet put in 28% fewer annual training hours (215 versus 298).) This despite the fact that I've gained 20+ pounds steadily over the last six seasons, and the effects of aging (notably a lower maximum heart rate) have become apparent—particularly in the last three years. Perhaps my salvation has been my experience. I've learned how to prepare myself in the weeks and days leading up to the race, and on race day itself, I know how to properly pace myself and handle my nutrition/hydration well enough to get to the finish line. There's no doubt in my mind that experience is a huge benefit in doing iron-distance triathlons.

Volunteers

Redman's volunteers are second to none. I've mentioned above the help I received from one in particular, but they were all outstanding. We couldn't do this stuff without them.

I pushed myself really hard in the last few miles of the marathon as I tried to finish in under 14 hours. Maybe a little too hard. As I was sitting down in the finish line area, I told the volunteers that I was feeling fine, but just needed to have a seat and drink some fluids. They brought me water and a Sprite.

I continued to sit there for a while, and occasionally the volunteers would come over and ask me if I wanted to go to the medical tent. I declined each time. I'm very reluctant and shy about asking people for help. It's a personal pride thing: Asking for help would be a sign of weakness. Yes, it's silly, but that's me.

I'll admit that I wasn't feeling 100%. I was also growing a tiny bit concerned that I might start to feel bad in a few minutes as I was getting my bike and all my gear bags to take back to the truck parked a quarter of a mile away. So, as a precautionary measure, the next time a volunteer came over to check on me, I agreed to let him escort me to the medical tent. There, they checked me out and offered me some grapes and water. Soon thereafter, I was truly feeling fine, so they gave me the go-ahead to leave. I didn't have any problems after that. The finish line volunteers are to be commended for their care and concern.

The day after

The awards ceremony/brunch was held at the OKC Marriott on Sunday morning. It was a fitting end to a great event. I had a chance to meet and chat with some of the racers—something you don't get much of an opportunity to do prior to the race.

I always feel a bit sad when awards ceremonies come to an end and everybody heads for home. It seems so abrupt. Here you've spent months training and anticipating the event, traveled some distance to get there, gone through all the pre-race motions, raced from dawn to dusk, and after the awards are handed out, it's suddenly over, and life goes on. It would be great if the post-race experience could last a little longer. (I always stay an extra night after the awards ceremony, and the OKC Marriott was completely deserted on Sunday night. The parking lot, which was packed on Friday and Saturday night, was vacant. There wasn't even a hint that a triathlon had been held that weekend.)

A sudden change of plans

I returned to my hotel room after the awards ceremony and grabbed my camera and street map to go do some sightseeing. I thought I'd go back to see the Oklahoma City National Memorial (site of the federal building bombing in 1995) and a few other places I visited after the 2006 Redman. However, as I got in my truck in the hotel parking lot, I just couldn't get enthused about doing any sightseeing. Been there, done that.

Instead, I acceded to the request made by David Wood (Redman's race director) at the awards ceremony for any volunteers to come out to the race site at Lake Hefner that afternoon to help clean it up. I drove over there, saw David and a bunch of the race staff and told them I wanted to help. They sincerely appreciated the offer and promptly put me to work. Up until we finished around 5 or 6 o'clock, we packed away supplies, loaded trucks, picked up trash, etc.



Redman race director David Wood at Friday's pre-race meeting

I had a blast! These are among the nicest, friendliest, most fun-loving, and dedicated people you'll meet at any triathlon, anywhere. I wish everyone who had raced at Redman had the chance to hang out with these people that afternoon. You'd have a much better appreciation for who they are, what they do and for the race itself. Although I only met and worked with these folks for four or five hours, I consider them friends.

As I said at the beginning of this race report, iron-distance race organizers are passionate about what they do. You have to be—it's a huge amount of work and responsibility for nothing more than pride in pulling off a big, successful event. None are more passionate than the folks who put on Redman. Most, if not all, are members of the Tri-OKC Triathlon Club, so there's a great sense of camaraderie among them to begin with. David Wood told me later that of the 30 members of the race committee, 26 have been members since Redman began four years ago. That speaks volumes about these people, and this race. I've been fortunate to have met some extraordinary race directors in the six years I've been doing triathlons, and David is certainly one of them.

Plans for 2009

It's strange how plans can quickly change. Just prior to this year's Redman, I didn't plan on doing this race again in 2009, for no other reason than to avoid getting bored or burned out on doing the same iron-distance race year after year. I kind of like the idea of doing different ones in different locations. However, after spending that afternoon with the Redman crew, I'd really like to go back next year. And you can be sure I'll give them a hand cleaning up afterward.

Some tips for those traveling to Oklahoma City

The OKC Marriott is a great place to stay. The Redman rate was \$95, but it was only good for Friday and Saturday nights. (I paid \$170 per night for the other nights.) High-speed Internet was \$10 per day. It's so convenient, though, I wouldn't want to stay anywhere else.

I never saw a Marriott airport shuttle (though I wasn't looking for one), but I noticed taxis parked at the Marriott on many occasions. There's an Enterprise Rent-A-Car location a block west of the hotel on Northwest Expressway.

If you're looking for a place to run or ride before the race, Lake Hefner's multi-use path around the lake is perfect for it. It's also a beautiful place just to relax.

Race changes for 2009

Redman was recently named as the host of the USA Triathlon Halfmax Long Course (i.e. half iron) and Club National Championships for 2009. This is a huge vote of confidence in the Redman organization, and will bring Redman some well-deserved national attention. It will also mean a much larger Redman event next year.

The Redman full iron-distance race will still be held, with 150 race slots available. There will be somewhere around 1000 slots available for Halfmax, with some reserved for qualifiers (I think the number is around 600) and the remainder open to general entry. The plans are to hold the USA Triathlon Club Championships separately, on Sunday. It should be a great weekend. Come and join us.

Thanks for reading!

Jim Glickert
Osage Beach, Missouri
October 2008



The sun sets over Lake Hefner.