

## Ironman Wisconsin Triathlon 2007: My Last Ironman?

I loved doing Ironman Wisconsin in September 2005. It was an incredible experience, and full of wonderful memories—of the great friends I met, of the thousands of enthusiastic spectators who cheered us on along the course, and of the excitement of being part of such a huge event. Crossing the finish line was one of the most unforgettable moments in my life.

In the days immediately after the triathlon, I knew that I wanted to go back to Madison someday and do it again. On September 11, 2006—minutes after online registration opened for Ironman Wisconsin 2007—I signed up. While there's always a breathless moment before committing yourself to something like this a year in advance, I was truly looking forward to it.

I never thought it would happen, but my interest in doing Ironman Wisconsin waned in the months leading up to it. It had nothing to do with this race in particular. It was mostly due to the physical and mental tolls that iron-distance triathlon training were taking on me.

The last three summers were brutally hot and humid in central Missouri. Unfortunately, doing an iron-distance race in September requires that the heaviest weeks of training be done in the hottest months of the year. Even though I avoided training during the worst times of the day, there was little escape. The water temperature of the outdoor swimming pool I used for training reached an uncomfortable 90 degrees. I did most of my running in the evenings, but there were many occasions when the temperature was still in the mid to upper 90s when I stepped out the door. Long bike rides, even on a flat, partly shaded gravel trail, were no fun at all. The heat and humidity took a lot out of me. I was constantly tired. I was getting tired of being tired. Is this how I would spend summer after summer for years to come? Is this what I had to look forward to?

What made the situation worse is that, this year, I was starting to find my athletic lifestyle turning into drudgery. For each of the last five years, I've run the Spirit of St. Louis Marathon in April (to force me to stay in shape over the winter), and I've done an iron-distance triathlon in September. My life has nearly been ruled by training for these events. There were many, many times when I would have loved to have done something other than train. I gave up lots of kayak rides (my favorite activity, since I live on a huge lake) and hikes through our nearby state park because I knew I had to swim, bike or run instead. The sacrifice didn't seem quite worth it anymore.

With a few weeks to go before Ironman Wisconsin, I was just wanting to get it over with. I wasn't looking to the long drive to Madison. I dreaded the mass swim start, especially after the the slugfest of two years ago—the one part of that race I don't recall fondly. I wasn't confident that my bike training would enable me to get through the hilly IM Wis-

consin bike course with enough “legs” to run a marathon. Even if my legs were ready, I knew the marathon would still be a long, painful experience.

As a result of all this, I was seriously thinking that this might be my last iron-distance triathlon. Five is enough, isn't it? What's the point of doing one after another after another? I read of people who have done dozens of them, and wonder if they're simply out for bragging rights for the most Ironmans completed. Who needs that? I don't. Even if I decided to do another one, though, I wasn't going to commit myself to it until the summer of 2008. (If you choose not to read this report in full, just skip down toward the end, and you'll know not to take my decisions seriously.)

## Thursday, September 6: Off to Madison

The seven-hour, 375-mile drive from St. Louis (where I stayed for two days before leaving for Wisconsin) was uneventful. It's pretty boring, actually. Mile after mile of nothing but Illinois corn fields. And hardly a hill to be found anywhere. If only Wisconsin was as flat as Illinois. :)

I'll admit that I'm a creature of habit. (It helps to be this way, by obviating the need to make new decisions, which I often dread.) I stayed at the Courtyard Marriott East, where I had stayed two years ago. Throughout my stay in Madison, I pretty much did everything exactly the way I did



*Wisconsin welcomes me.*

*How often do you see a Mercedes convertible pulling a trailer? I've never seen that....not even in the Ozarks, where just about anything is possible.*



*Illinois. It's flat and grows lots of corn. That's all there is to know about it.*

them in 2005. I followed the same schedule, ate at the same restaurants, and even wore the same race jerseys. Heck, on race day, I even parked in the same parking spot. Courtyard Marriott East threw me my only curve by putting me in room 222, instead of 206, which I occupied in 2005. They must have been playing with my head. :)



## Friday, September 7; Pancakes, Lines, Gear Bags and a Great Dinner

One of the highlights of my 2005 experience was eating breakfast at the Pancake Cafe in Fitchburg with a group of triathletes that I had met online through the Tri-Newbies Online (TNO) forum. It was so much fun that I was hoping we could do it again with the TNOers who were doing the race this year. As it turned out, about a dozen of us showed up, and it was another great time, and a real highlight of this year's trip. It took a little time to organize, but it was well worth it. Even though we're mostly strangers to



*The TNO get-together. Left to right: Doug ("drothhaar"), his wife Deanna, Ally ("ally-ac2"), Joe Ryan, Jeff ("jwm"), Thom ("Thom/TC"), Steve ("Steve in IL") with wife Jennifer and son Derek, Tim ("j3ckyl") and yours truly. Tim ("cimit") showed up later.*

one another and different in many ways, there's a quiet camaraderie that exists among triathletes, and particularly among those doing an Ironman.

After the breakfast get-together, it was off to the Monona Terrace to register for the race. It seemed rather tedious this year, because I had to get in one long line after another—one to show a USAT card, one to show photo identification, one to get weighed, and one more to get a wristband, race numbers and goody bag. There was even a long line to get into the Inside-Out Sports store at the Expo. (I didn't even bother getting in that one. In



*Ironman Village at Monona Terrace.*

fact, this year, I bought none of their overpriced souvenirs.) With about 2,400 athletes doing the race, the lines were pretty long. I like the short, fast-moving lines at smaller triathlons that I've done.

Perhaps the worst part of doing an iron-distance triathlon is deciding exactly what to put in the gear bags. It's bad enough having to pack all of your triathlon stuff at home, but now you have to figure out exactly which items you'll want to put in each of the five bags (Dry Clothes, Swim-to-Bike, Bike-to-Run, Bike Special Needs and Run Special Needs) that you receive. My hotel room looked like a tornado had hit it, with triathlon stuff spread out over both king beds as I tried to organize it all. I did it, but it wasn't fun.

Shortly after I finished Ironman Wisconsin in 2005, a relative newcomer to TNO who goes by the username "grandmama", and who had just signed up for 2006, started asking me questions about training and preparation for her first Ironman. I shared with Maria what I knew had worked for me, but I didn't want to "coach" her since I didn't feel qualified to do so. She trained hard, and I thought she could finish the race but, no matter how well you train, you just never know what's going to be thrown at you on race day. I logged on to the race website on the morning of the race, only to see that the weather was cold and rainy—horrible conditions, especially for your first Ironman attempt. Despite the awful weather, Maria not only finished the race, but she finished third in her age group. I couldn't have been happier for her. All through the day, I was worried that her year of training and anticipation for this one day might not have a good ending. That would have been a nightmare.

Maria came to IM Wisconsin this year to volunteer and to register in person for 2008. I finally got a chance to meet her and her relative, Norma, at dinner. We had a wonderful time. Maria is truly remarkable. She's a loving wife, mother and grandmother, and how she has enough energy to train for an Ironman while doing all the other things she does is beyond comprehension. When you meet her in person and see how much energy and enthusiasm she has, though, you start to understand. The number of women in the 55–59 age group who race in an Ironman each year is exceptionally few. You rarely get a chance in life to meet someone like her. I'm so glad I had that chance.

## **Saturday, September 8**

I drove downtown in the morning to drop off my bike and gear bags at Monona Terrace. Afterward, I was pretty much free the rest of the day. I would have liked to walk around and see the street market that was going on around the



*Wisconsin State Capitol*

Capitol building, but I knew that I had to minimize the amount of time I spent on my feet this day. So, I went to lunch and headed back to the hotel.

The rest of the day was spent relaxing in the hotel room, drinking Gatorade, eating healthy (and salty) snacks, and trying to get my mind focused on the race. I ate a pasta dinner at Fazoli's, and returned to the hotel for some quiet reflection before going to bed around 9:00 p.m.

## Sunday, September 9: Race Day

The moment I woke up on the day in 2003 that I did my first iron-distance triathlon, I said out loud to myself, "LET'S DO IT!". It's become a ritual of mine for every Ironman, and today was no exception.

I ate breakfast and took my supplements shortly after waking up at 3:30 a.m. While eating breakfast, I even typed an e-mail to TNO's "virgingirl" thanking her for her support. She was expecting me to finish in 10 hours. HA HA! Dream on, vgirl! :)

I left the hotel around 4:45 a.m. and arrived downtown shortly after 5:00 a.m. I dropped off the special needs bags, got bodymarked (the cute bodymarker declined to write her home phone number on me, as I had suggested), pumped up my bike tires, and then went inside Monona Terrace around 5:30 a.m. to wait until it was time to put on the wetsuit. I hate sitting around and waiting before an Ironman. I wasn't nervous, and I was able to relax, but it's no fun at all. A whole year of anticipation and training are just about to end, and you want to get the race underway, not sit around and watch thousands of people milling about a convention center.

Around 6:10 a.m., I started changing into my wetsuit and then headed down to the swim start area for the prompt 7:00 a.m. start. The mood among the athletes could best be described as a quiet but anxious excitement. The large crowd of spectators helped



*Monona Terrace parking garage helix, obscuring the view of the swim start and finish. Running up the helix after the swim is quite a challenge.*



*Swim-to-bike transition bags lined up before the race begins*

cular guys.

## **The Swim**

The swim was the part of this entire trip that I'd been dreading the most ever since deciding to do this race again.

In 2005, there were about 2,100 racers at the swim start, and for 1 hour and 20 minutes, I was doing nothing but getting bumped, hit and kicked, and doing some of that myself unintentionally to others. Triathlon isn't a contact sport, but it sure was for me that day. This year, there were about 2,400 athletes at the start. Great! Three hundred more people, with 1,200 more flailing appendages, to contend with.



*I'm somewhere right in the middle of this madness*

In 2005, I lined up on the left side of the field, mostly because I heard everyone say that they were going to line up on the right. The two-lap course ran counterclockwise, so eventually everyone to my right would be moving toward me. This year, I thought I'd line up toward the right side, just in

make the mood a bit festive. While standing around, I heard a group of spectators chanting, "Anna, Anna, Anna...". I looked over to see if perhaps it was TNO's "marathanna", whom I had met at the pancake breakfast in 2005. Sure enough, there she was, with that unmistakable, beaming smile, and I went over to say "hi". I was so glad not to have missed seeing her this year (she couldn't make this year's breakfast). I also saw Maria and Norma among the crowd of spectators, and they wished me luck. They would be volunteering later in the day at the sunscreen station. Norma would enjoy ogling all the mus-

case it might be better. After the first 20 minutes, the field spread out a bit, and the bumping and kicking wasn't nearly as bad as two years ago. At about the 45-minute mark, I was actually able to find some openings where I could swim with only occasional contact.

There are times during an iron-distance triathlon when experience is invaluable. For me, one of them always occurs around the 15-minute mark of the swim. It's about at that point that my heart rate has not yet climbed high enough to support my level of effort. As a result, I start to get a bit winded, and tired. It's not a pleasant feeling, knowing that there's still at least an hour of swimming to go. In fact, for a few seconds, it's a bit scary. Thoughts of not being able to finish the swim—or worse (i.e. impending death)—suddenly creep into my head. Fortunately, through experience, I know that all I have to do is turn over and begin using a backstroke. After a couple minutes, my breathing, heart rate and effort level all become in sync, and everything's fine. It's too bad that backstroke is slower than freestyle and makes sighting the course buoys and other swimmers difficult, because that stroke is so much more pleasant to use. Instead of looking at murky, green water, you're looking at the beautiful blue sky, and enjoying it.

I finished the swim in 1:20:08, about a minute slower than 2005 but better than what I was expecting. I was so glad to be done with it. Swimming 2.4 miles seems like an eternity. When you stand on top of Monona Terrace and look at the swim course (actually, half the course, since it's two loops around), it's very intimidating. While up there on Saturday morning, I saw a few people practicing on the course, and they were almost invisible.

## The Bike

I went into Ironman Wisconsin with just two goals: finish, and finish a bit faster than 2005's 14:46:49. I didn't think I'd be able to count on improved swim and run times over 2005, so I focused on a faster bike split. My 2005 bike split was 7:47:04. That's slow, but I was unfamiliar with the course, and the weather was hot and windy. (In fact, hundreds of people failed to finish the bike course in 2005, so I was glad just to have finished it.) This year, the weather conditions were perfect. At the start of the bike, the temperature was about 64 degrees. The afternoon high was only 72 degrees, and some clouds moved in occasionally to keep things quite comfortable. Under these conditions, finish-



*I don't enjoy swimming, and I'm always glad just to finish it.*



*The weather was absolutely perfect while on the bike.*

ing the bike course faster than 2005 was a near slam dunk.

I took it easy for the first hour, then maintained a faster but sustainable pace the rest of the way. Each hour, I drank about a bottle of Gatorade and a bottle of water, ate a gel and half a banana, and took two Endurolytes and a Lava Salt tablet.



*A few of the spectators on Old Sauk Pass. I carried my digital camera with me on the bike.*





*Without a doubt, IM Wisconsin has the best-looking female spectators I've ever seen. That doesn't include the ones on the right, though.*

Proper pacing and nutrition/hydration are two other areas where my experience helped a lot.

I finished the bike in 7:11:08. I was pleased with it. Not only was it 36 minutes faster than two years ago, but it was just a bit slower than my bike split at Redman Triathlon last year, on a course that was less difficult.

## **The Run**

The emotional high from finishing a 112-mile Ironman bike segment is quickly followed by a dispiriting low—knowing how bad your legs feel as you step off the bike, and knowing that you still have 26.2 miles to go.

I saw Maria at the sunscreen station when I exited the bike-to-run transition area, so it was a nice emotional uplift, but a few minutes later when I started to run, the discomfort in my legs took me back down. My legs were trashed. This was going to be a long, painful marathon. I looked at my watch, and determined that the race clock was around 8:55 when I started the marathon. It was then that I set an on-the-fly goal of finishing in under 14 hours. I knew it would be very, very close. Most of my IM marathon times have been around 5:00–5:20, including 5:16:42 on this course in 2005.

I struggled the whole way. I ran whenever I could, but I spent a LOT of time walking. As the miles wore on, I walked more. Sometimes, I could only run 50 feet before having to walk again. I stayed on top of my nutrition and hydration, but my sore legs were the limiter. It was just a matter of putting one foot in front of another, and doing the best I could.

I reached mile 6 when the race clock stood at 10:00. That proved to be both a benefit and a curse, by making arithmetic easy to perform. With 20 miles to go and 4 hours until the race clock hit 14:00, I knew that 12:00-minute miles would be what I needed to average. I calculated that I needed to reach miles 11, 16, 21 and 26 at the top of each hour. The curse was that I was tormenting myself by constantly looking at my watch to see whether I was on track time-wise. As time went on, I was



*This is the only picture of me on the run where I look like I'm not dying.*



WOOOOOOOOOO!

slowing down, and it was making a sub 14-hour finish more difficult to achieve.

I reached mile 16 slightly behind schedule. A few miles later, I realized I was falling even further behind. I simply didn't have the legs to get back on schedule. From this point on, I just did my best. I felt good emotionally, but my sore legs made the marathon a miserable experience.

## The Finish

I finished, in 14:04:22, about 42 minutes faster than in 2005. Crossing the finish line was an unforgettable experience. As I approached the last turn toward the finish line, the cheers from the thousands of spectators grew louder, and the adrenaline rush enabled me to run—yes, run, without

any feeling of pain—down the finish chute, hollering “WOOOO!” like a maniac, and taking video of the spectators with my digital camera. A whole year of training and anticipation had been focused on crossing that line, and I made it. Just like my previous four iron-distance triathlon finishes, it’s the most exhilarating feeling that I’ve ever experienced.

## Party at the Finish Line

After sitting down and eating some real food, I changed clothes, retrieved my bike and gear bags, and hauled them to my truck parked a few blocks away. Then, I headed back to the finish line area to join the large crowd of spectators celebrating the last-hour finishers. It’s something that I wish everyone



*Spectators cheering on the last-hour finishers*



*A five-time Ironman finisher. Before 2002, I never thought I could finish one.*

could see. The lights, the spectators, the music, and Mike Reilly entertaining the crowd while Tom Ziebart announces the finishers’ names, all combine to make this a huge celebration. What makes it truly special, of course, is seeing men and women of varying ages and abilities realizing their dreams of crossing the finish line. It’s one of the most inspiring things I’ve ever witnessed.

## So Where Do I Go From Here?

You may recall from above that I was seriously thinking of not doing any more Ironmans, or at least not committing myself to doing one until the summer of 2008. But something happened in the days following Ironman Wisconsin. I’m not sure exactly when it happened, but I know it happened before leaving Madison two days after the race.

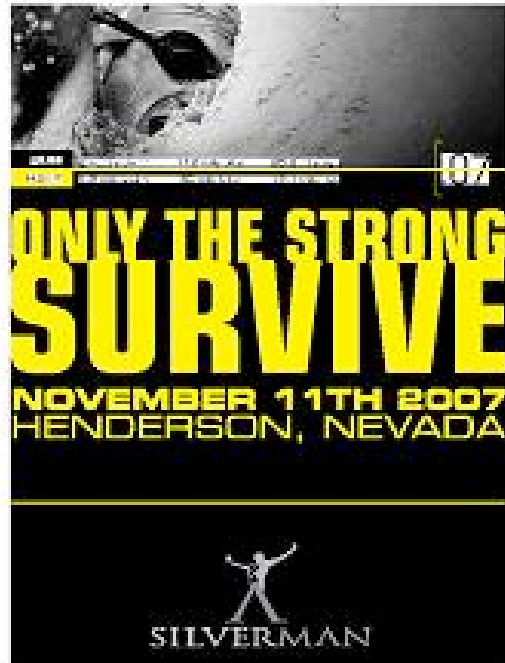
I decided that I wanted to keep doing iron-distance triathlons, and even come back to Madison to do this race yet again some day. I realized that doing triathlons and marathons is a part of me and, God willing, I’m not ready to give them up. Doing these

events forces me to exercise and live a healthy lifestyle, but it also gives me challenges, goals, and, well, something to look forward to in life. At this point, I can't imagine living without them. Maybe when I'm older, but not yet.

## Why Wait Til '08?

There's an iron-distance triathlon in Nevada that's coming up on November 11, 2007. It's called the Silverman Triathlon, and it's billed as the toughest iron-distance triathlon in North America. It's also received glowing reports from athletes who have raced it in its first two years.

Within a week after finishing Ironman Wisconsin, I started seriously considering doing Silverman. I felt that I was in good enough shape at the time. More importantly, though, I just wanted to see if I could finish it. On paper the race looks very intimidating: The bike course features 9,700 feet of climbing, and there's another 2,000 feet of climbing on the run course. That's much harder than anything I've ever attempted. But, I don't want to look back years from now and wonder whether I could have finished it. I want to take a shot at it now. I may never get another chance to try. And even if I fail to finish it, at least I'll know that I tried. I can live with that.



*What the hell was I thinking?*

So, in the course of about two months, I've gone from questioning whether I ever wanted to do another iron-distance triathlon, to taking on the toughest one in North America. The truly scary part is that, after Silverman, what's next?

It should be interesting. Stay tuned.

Thanks for reading!

Jim Glickert  
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