

FINISHING AN IRONMAN TRIATHLON 23 YEARS LATER!

BY DON EOVIÑO (MARCH 2007)

I am losing consciousness, the IV needle won't go in, my veins have collapsed and my body is falling into a comatose state. It was October 1984, at the Kona Ironman Triathlon.

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

I was allowed on the course with a press badge for the 1982 Budweiser Hawaii Ironman Triathlon when Sports Illustrated filmed the dramatic collapse of Julie Moss being passed in the last 20 yds. by Kathleen McCarthy on the way to the finish line. She was winning the woman's event when she staggered like in an earthquake, fell, defecated herself, and crawled the last few yards to the finish line. Sports Illustrated filmed the memorable event and it changed the face of the Ironman forever. Next year I accompanied my friend to again witness this amazing feat of endurance and I got the bug!

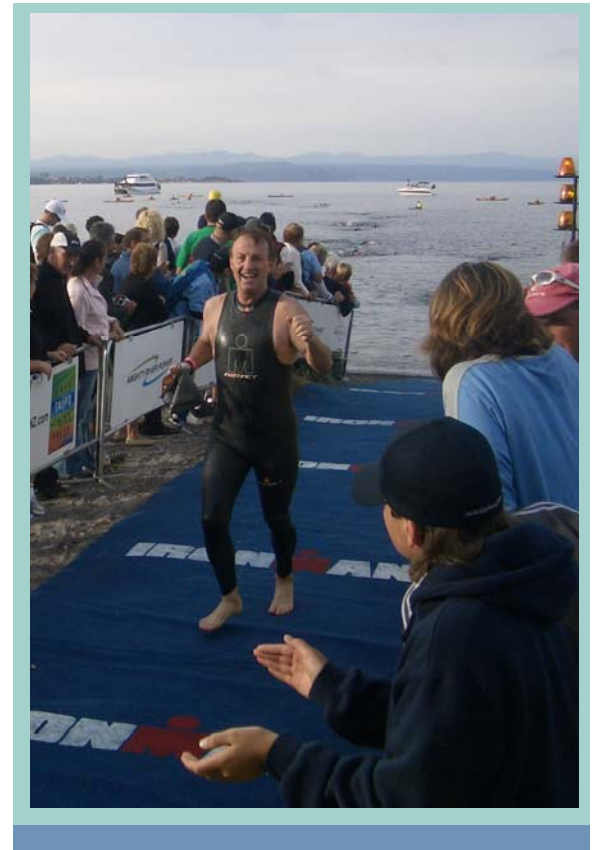
The marathon craze started in Hawaii in the 70's and I had completed several of them and now wanted a bigger challenge. So in April 1984 I was surprised to open my mail and see that I had won a lottery slot to compete in October, in what was then, the only race like that in the World.

That was the beginning of the mistakes of how not to finish an Ironman. With only 6 months to train, I was already behind the eight ball. In addition, my goal was not to finish, but to beat a couple of my buddy's race times of less than 14 hrs. that had done the race in the previous two years.

During the accelerated training, I probably had almost every common sports injury related to distance athletes know to man, including inflaming my Ilio-tibial band to the point that with only 6 weeks to go, coupled with a bleeding ulcer caused by stress, I couldn't even run at all. On the Thursday, the week before the event, I swam, biked, and attempted to run a few miles of the whole course, to convince myself that I could walk the marathon course and still finish in my goal time. I didn't realize then, that I couldn't recover by the time of the race.

We were training then under the Cro-magnon method of "run till you drop", versus the "techno-man" method nowadays where body, bike, and mind are trained to a science.

The week leading up the race, I hadn't slept at all, I was taking blood coagulants for the bleeding ulcer, aspirin to heal the injuries, and a steroid shot to numb the pain of the inflamed iliotibial band. The night before the race, the couple next door to my hotel room were arguing all night long on their lanai, and I entered the water at 6:00am with 1200 otherwise well rested athletes, ready to battle, already exhausted!



Nonetheless, I did finish the swim and bike in my goal times, but unknowingly was bonking on the bike as I transitioned to my run (walk). I was still fantasizing that I could beat my friends time and reach my goal, and neglected to assess my situation as I hobbled out of the changing tent and raced up heartbreak hill at the Kona Surf onto the marathon course. It wasn't 3 miles later that I was stumbling like Grete Waitz in her first New York City marathon in 1978, totally bonked, and out of body fuel.

I was becoming disoriented, light was becoming dark, and things were getting fuzzy. Wobbling and weaving I made it to the next aid station. I knew I was cooked and DQ'ed myself. In the van on the way to the MASH tent, I started to feel sorry for myself when this 19yr. old girl next to me was overheating to 110', was packed in ice, when her heart stopped, and she was whomped with the electric paddles back into life.

Observing this I immediately shut up and vowed not to complain of my malady. Here I am lying on this cot, refusing aid until a scrupulous doctor saw the whites of my eyes and immediately ordered an IV into my arm. Finally with the drip installed, my comatose body started to recharge like a Delco battery, as the glucose coursed through my veins. Stretched out in the DQ tent, I finally realized "I am going to survive," but I'm not allowed back on the course. I am recovered, but not proud. I didn't achieve my goal of beating my friends' time, and ingloriously, didn't even finish the event. From my Junior high school days it was drummed into my head- "don't quit", "at least finish", "winners never quit, and quitters never win".

For the next 23 years I completed many triathlons, duathlons, and exotic marathons, but never an Ironman distance. During this time, this sport probably grew into the biggest athletic participation event beyond college and pro sports in the world- all stemming from the inglorious day in 1982 when Julie Moss put the Ironman Triathlon on the map. It gnawed on me as I saw other triathlete friends wearing an ironman finisher t-shirt, and I couldn't. I couldn't seem to find the time nor discipline to complete this goal. Years flew by!

Finally, after 23 years, I was determined to: refocus my energy, recover from minor knee surgery, seek a personal trainer, and get this monkey off my back by finishing a full distance Ironman Triathlon of a 2.4 mile swim, a 112 mile bike ride, followed by a 26.2 mile marathon, during the year of my 60th. Birthday. During this year, I trained as I should have, with the understanding that I wasn't going to drastically alter my life style by becoming a total ascetic, but enough so to enjoy the training, the race, and also enjoy life.

By the start of the event in Lake Taupo, New Zealand on Saturday 6:00am, March 3rd. 2007, I had won my age group for all Hawaii competitors in a ½ ironman in Kona, completed two other ½ ironman races in Monaco and Lubbock, Texas, and came in first in my age group in the Honolulu Tinman Triathlon. My goal was not to break 14 hrs. and not to beat my friends times from 23 yrs. ago, but to finish!!!!!!!

I had hired a personal coach, I put the time and effort in for one year, I followed the training schedule as best as I could, I avoided serious injuries, and here I am in the Lake in 65' water nervously waiting for the starter's gun to go off.

GOING



The race proved to be as daunting as I imagined. The weather was an unanticipated obstacle averaging mid 60's during the week which translated into a horrible sore throat. I couldn't even attempt to put my toe in the water until race day. To thwart the cold on the bike, I purchased a bike jacket the day before, and wore it after my surprisingly fast swim. After a speedy 28 miles on the bike, I was thinking, "not only can I break 14rs, I might even break 13 hrs." Shockingly, at 56 miles I realized I overheated myself with the jacket, and sweated out all my fluids and was starting to bonk only 4 ½ hr. into the race. So much for beating my friend's time and breaking 14 hrs-just finishing was going to be a challenge. At every next significant milestone, at the 56, 84, and 112 mile mark on the bike, and at the halfway point on the 26 mile marathon, I assessed my condition, and the thought of continuing was dubious. At these points there was a revelation that I was at risk for not finishing after 23 years of waiting! If that wasn't bad enough, Golem from "The Lord of the Rings", resurrected from the fires of Mount Doom and perched his gangly self on my shoulder wailing, "You can't do this!, you are too tired!, you are going to get injured!, you are going to get pneumonia!, you don't need to prove anything to anybody!, two thirds of the race is enough!, you are going

to die"!!!!!! On my other shoulder, Golem's alter ego was pleading: "Just finish!, keep moving!, there is no glory in finishing two thirds of the event!, Don't stop!"

The thought of breaking 14 hrs. was quickly slipping away, but I reaffirmed my Mantra- "Not finishing is not an option"! I contemplated: "Does anybody care if I did 13hrs.59 min, or 14 hr. 1 minute?"- "I don't think so"! At each of these points, when I didn't know if I could continue, I threw my competitive instincts out the window, and opted to take a break for 5 minutes. Stumbling upon the aid stations, I coolly told the volunteers that I was okay, don't worry about me, and I was just going to lie down to stretch. With deep breathing, a little of Tai Chi, and a 90 sec. combat nap, I regained my fervor and continued on. I coined a new Moniker- Don Van Winkle. When I didn't think I could dig any deeper, I revisited my soul and repeated- "just keep moving." The breaks worked and with each short rest I got stronger.

I had started with the stars at 7:00 am, and now was heading to the end with a full moon at about 8:00 pm.. With only an hour and a quarter to go, I finally realized that I really might finish! I floated like a butterfly, my mind soaring above the moonbeams, my body like a machine. The sun had set, the temperature had dropped to a cool 60', my mind had left my body, and I ran with glee like a kid first learning to walk. My strategy had left me with a little gas left in the tank. As I paced the last 8 miles I saw that I was doing negative splits and I sped up passing several exasperating souls.

KEEP GOING AND GOING

One last thrill awaited as I could see my friends and wife ahead, but they weren't smiling! They were yelling, screaming and pointing ahead to a further runner near the entry to the stadium. I began to make out their shouts of: "Catch him, Catch him, he is in your age group"! No longer confused, I thought to myself, "this is the last thing that I want to do at the end of this day!" But my competitive juices arose for the last time, and like a guided-missile, I calculated that, indeed, I could catch my poor unwitting compatriot, withering before he would finish. With a one last burst of energy that I summoned from a place I didn't know existed, with my lungs screaming and my legs pumping, I passed him as I could see the tape and sprinted the last 500 yards to the roar of the crowd, smiling from ear to ear, hearing the announcer yell out the words I had waited 23 years to hear: "Don Eovino, you are an Ironman!"

That next day I was walking easily, no worse the wear except for losing 5 toenails. I reflected on my times, and started counting the Don Van Winkle episodes that totaled 20 min, and then I remembered my subliminal thoughts of breaking 14 hrs. "Let's see, my finishing time of 14hrs. 15 minutes minus 20 minutes of naps".....Oh Fugged-about! Who Cares?"



After basking in the glory of accomplishing a lifetime goal and proudly wearing my finishers T-shirt, I chatted with my friends about the race. I wryly smiled and said: "It is one thing to think you might die doing an event, it is another to be willing to die for it".