

Reflections on Ironman Coeur d'Alene

June 27, 2010

As I staggered through the final left turn left onto Sherman Ave, seeing the brightly lit nirvana of the Finish Line a mere seven blocks away, I said to myself "wow, that is soooo fucking beautiful". When people around me chuckled, cheered, and encouraged me to relish it, I realized I'd actually said it out loud. It was nothing short of amazing. Much more than the nearly three dozen ibuprofen tablets I'd taken over the last eight hours, this was the drug that kept me pushing through the pain, encouraged me to remain hopeful, and allowed me to endure the suffering. Finally it was right there before me and no longer some figment of my weary imagination.

There is absolutely NOTHING like running the final meters to an Ironman finish and this one was dizzyingly sweeter than my first. Part of me *knew* I would be here, part of me *feared* I'd never make it here, part of me just wanted this brutal day to be *over*, and a very small part of me *didn't give a fuck* that I was here. I was most satisfied about the last one for I had nothing to prove to anyone. My demons had been exorcised when I dove into an icy Lake Coeur d'Alene nearly 16 hours before and there was a hell of a lot more than just time, miles, and sweat between then and now.

The day started off well enough. Decent night's sleep, comfortably awakened, gear ready and I got down a light breakfast while checking in on a couple of last minute encouraging emails and of course The Weather. I had my pre-race music mix cued up on the iPhone and felt relaxed & confident. It was going to be a great day.

Mary drove Bobby Z and I down close to the start a dropped us off a couple blocks from transition. We were near the Finish Line but I never stole a glance toward it. While it was logistically less than a tenth of a mile to my right, I fully understood that in reality more than 140 challenging miles stood between it and me. Therein lies one of the seemingly futile ironies of Ironman. You work your ass off to cover 140.6 miles and end up literally only a couple hundred meters away from where you started. Reason #47 people think we're completely fucking nuts.

Let's Go Crazy came up in the mix (still a huge Prince fan). It was the perfect song as Bobby and I approached the swelling chaos of transition and I was obliged to crank it. To our left I noticed Heather and Brian and I walked up behind them singing as I gave them both a big hug. Great music and hugs from those I love are my two prerequisites before life changing events; I was now mentally ready. I tried to arrange a pre-start meeting place with Bobby knowing that with the pandemonium, we'd likely not see each other again for a long time. I hugged him and encouraged him to enjoy his day as I waded into the frenzy of the transition area looking for the purple banana 'til they put me in the truck. Let's Go!

Pre-Race

There were a few more operational tasks to complete before the beach start. Similar to IM WI in 2007, I felt oddly calm and in a near transcendental state taking in all of the mayhem as I moved through the crowd. I love the high-wire act of balancing the sensory overload in the middle of thousands of athletes and spectators. The amazing energy can be suffocating

or invigorating.

As I tossed my Run special needs bag into the pile, I noticed a strangely colored bag landing next to it. It was immediately apparent that somebody mistakenly dropped their Bike bag. I saw the man's back and yelled to him as he trotted away - no luck. I grabbed the bag and caught up to him just as he was tossing his Run bag into the Bike bag pile. Volunteers probably would have caught the error, but it wasn't worth the chance. I considered it today's Karma Deposit. Then over to load my bike with supplies. Got to see Chad in the bike area getting his things set up and wished him well. Off to the porta potty, my last task before donning my neoprene body condom. Long lines for porta potties. Really long. Texted Heather for alternate meet up for giving her my dry clothes bag and phone. In line a fellow athlete noticed the messages written on my hands, said that's a great idea, and went off in search of her own sharpie.

The left hand was simple: *Form. Food. Fun.* The Form was to remind me to focus on good mechanics and proper form for each phase, to be efficient and prevent avoidable problems later in the day. Food was a nod to maintaining appropriate glucose and hydration levels. While I knew the day would be difficult, Fun was to remind me to enjoy the experience as much as possible. If I can't thank a volunteer or smile at an encouraging spectator, I am going too hard and need to refocus my priorities and energy expenditure levels. Even more simple, the right hand, compliments of Stayc's mom, was emblazoned with FEARLESS! my new personal motto. I had no idea how important that mindset would later become.

Finally got through the porta potty gauntlet, handed my gear and phone to Heather and stole a hug over the fence and headed toward the beach with the rest of the herd as I finished putting on the wetsuit. The announcer was beginning to plead with the athletes to expeditiously move to the beach and to cross the timing mat on the way. A woman next to me turned and said she was slightly confused because she wasn't used to being called an athlete and never really considered herself one; I could certainly relate. I put my hand on her shoulder and said "You've paid a lot of money and worked awfully hard to get here. Today we can be athletes." She smiled and gave me an appreciative hug. Karma Deposit #2.

Amazingly, I found the gang on the way to the entry point. With one exception, I wished them well and walked with Bobby to the beach. Disappointingly, as soon as I dove into the water to acclimate to the 61 degree ice bath, we were kicked out for the beach start. During the National Anthem I decided that one of my next goals was to sing the Anthem at an Ironman event - preferably not while wearing a wetsuit and goggles.

IM CdA is a mass start off the beach. Athletes are stretched out across the beach for quite a ways, maybe 200 meters? I was lined up about halfway up the beach from the water and maybe a third of the way from the buoy line. I couldn't tell where Bobby and Stayc ended up, but could see Jess and Michele fifteen feet or so to my left, a little closer to the water. I had done my best to avoid her but something just didn't feel right. I glanced at my right hand and moved toward Michele. I put my hand on her shoulder and wished her well, she said something back but with my earplugs in I couldn't hear. As I made my way back to my

original position, it was apparent my goggles were leaking and we hadn't started yet. Karma Deposit #3.

*****The Swim*****

The start was somewhat rough which I expected at least through the first turn. The counter-clockwise, rectangular course is 900 meters out and 100 meters across. Highlight of my swim came about 50 meters after the first turn. I thought I recognized a wetsuit and then when I noticed the bare arms, I pulled up next to her, our faces about a foot apart and yelled "Hey Lauf!". Amazingly she heard me and yelled "Hey Deaner!".

Got through the first lap and didn't mind walking up on the beach to cross the timing mat. I was in no hurry to get back into the scrum. What a brutal first lap. I'd gotten the crap kicked out of me. This seemed a common experience with all the athletes I talked to afterwards. Stayc even had a watch stripped from her wrist.

I liked getting out and walking over timing mat, before casually getting back in water. There was less contact on the second lap but still way too much. 2300 athletes in a mass start seems not only uncomfortable, but downright dangerous. Strangely, I had some massive cramping in my feet once up on the beach the final time. Was thankful to be stripped (of the wetsuit) and heading into T1.

*****Transition 1 - Swim to Bike*****

We're really spoiled at IM WI with the indoor accommodations for changing areas. I hated the outdoor transition/changing tents, but loved the convenience of the portable urinal trough inside. The changing area was busy but there were chairs available. Took my time, got my stuff together and headed out to get my bike. I rolled out of transition and through the hot corner hoping to see someone I knew but did not. Tried to use the shorter out and back, in-town leg along Lake Coer d'Alene Drive to settle in. I had been warned this was a deceptively fast section that loved to suck too much juice out of you early.

Coming back into the hot corner area on Lakeside Ave was a bit nerve-wracking for me. The street is packed with spectators which is awesome but there is a ton of pedestrian traffic crossing the street. Thankfully, they've implemented crossing monitors but its a bit of a decline and even coasting you're moving pretty fast to be in such close proximity to scurrying flesh and bones. The hot corner is technically a full block where spectators can see cyclists up to six times as they pass near the transition area. The drawback is that based on the relative lower elevation of the hot corner location, cyclists are typically screaming through at a pretty high rate of speed and can be very challenging to identify.

Heading out of town there were ton's of cheering spectators and I enjoyed the mostly flat section out to Hayden Lake. The long technical downhill on English Pt. went well, with several jittery bikers to avoid around the corners as expected. The uphill sections out to the far turn-around on Ohio Match Rd also went well. I spun in a comfortable gear (thankful for the compact crank set installed just a couple of weeks before) and was getting in the nutrition I needed as planned.

Heading back towards town, the wind was gently picking up and I expected it to be much worse coming into town on the second lap. The little out and back dogleg on Northwest Blvd just prior to the transition area was lined with far more people than I expected and I was back through the hot corner looking toward special needs at the Lake CdA Dr. turn-around point. I was starting to develop a bit of an upset stomach and my liquid nutrition was becoming increasingly unpalatable.

In Special Needs, I munched some pringles, got water, switched nutrition bottles and replenished other stocks. A volunteer recognized my IM WI jersey and told me he had a son living in Madison and we chatted about IM WI a bit while I was getting organized. After 3 or 4 minutes, I was back on my way. Another slightly paranoid trip back down Lakeside with my hands on the brakes. I stayed upright into the hot corner again and saw Stayc's parents, yelling to them as I passed. It was awesome to finally see someone I recognized.

Settled in again when I got back onto Government Way heading out of town. Bit of a tailwind, I was feeling pretty good except for a slightly upset stomach which wasn't entirely uncommon. I picked up the pace a bit, blissfully and completely unaware that just a few blocks down the road my entire experience was about to suddenly and dramatically change.

Then came The Truck Incident.

When I got hit on my bike, the first thing I thought, once I got my bearings, was "can I continue?" Interestingly, it was not "fuck, I won't be able to finish" or even "I'm not sure I can finish". Looking back, that was a seminal moment for me. Not for Dean the Ironman athlete, but for Dean the person. I was innately focused on the process, not the outcome. While I understood the general direction, my journey was only about the next step. So after making sure the bike was in a low gear, I checked for oncoming cars, and shoved off. Karma Withdrawal #1.

I didn't get back on the bike thinking I had to finish. Crossing the Finish Line was not even a remote consideration at that point. I got back on the bike because that's what I wanted to be doing. I wasn't done yet. I only focused on the next stretch, the next hill, the next aid station. Thankfully that was good enough to get me through the next forty or so miles with a screaming, knotted right quad, unable to take a full breath because of the pain in my back and shoulder, and with a banged up derailleur that wouldn't allow me to use the lowest two gears. The last 40 miles of the bike became a sufferfest. I constantly reminded myself that everyone out there was suffering and it wasn't my exclusive right. Self pity wouldn't turn the pedals, determination does. I needed the pedals to turn. No one forced me to get back on the bike and though I was suffering, it was exclusively my choice. I fully understood that I was extremely lucky to even have the choice.

The forced rest period did nothing to help my upset stomach and I ended up switching exclusively to bananas from the remaining aid stations on the bike and continued to drink a lot of water with electrolytes & pop ibuprofen. The adrenaline rush from the accident was long gone and there was little mental relief coming back into town at the end of the second lap. It was just a grinding focus on getting into transition, barely able to smile at encouraging spectators.

Transition 2 - Bike to Run

My life over the last few months could easily be summed up in the 10 minutes and 43 seconds it took me to get through T2; another seminal "moment" for me.

I stumbled off the bike, limped into the transition tent, dropped my bag and collapsed in to a folding chair, absolutely spent. The thoughts came quickly and darkly:

I'm done.

There's no way I'm going to be able to run.

There's no fucking chance I can finish this...

FUCK!

fuck.

Then a volunteer hurried over, completely unaware of what I'd already been through, and anxiously asked what he could do. He was like a dog so very excited to see you as you come home from a rough day at work. Before I could open my mouth, he'd dumped my bag out and began to arrange items in front of me. I stared at him blankly, not ready to do anything but just sit there.

"I'm good, thanks."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I can take care of this."

"Can I get you some water?"

Long pause...

"Sure."

He bounded away leaving me to make a decision I'd forgotten I had. The aches remained but the thoughts became a little less dark:

I -was- planning on needing to walk a portion of the run if I had achilles issues

There -is- ibuprofen in my T2 bag and more in my special needs bag

Just walking -probably- won't exacerbate any injuries

Just -starting- the run didn't commit me to complete the entire marathon

I slowly took off my cracked helmet, torn bike shoes, crumpled race belt, and emptied my jersey pockets; the sharpie'd message on my right hand barely perceptible after an already long day of work, sweat, and sun block.

I should try

Stopping now is just plain quitting...

I have to at least try

As I pulled up my jersey reaching to take off my heart rate monitor strap, I saw the message from Mom on my chest: the reversed Carpe Diem! tattoo done in her handwriting so I could be inspired by it every morning I looked in the mirror. Sitting on my ass in a sweaty tent, demoralized, beaten, and quitting was not the epitaph I wanted written on my IM CdA tombstone. I had to try.

A cup of water appeared in front of my face.

"Can I help with your shoes?"

"Yes, please." Karma Withdrawal #2.

The "Run"

As I exited the tent, a volunteer handed me my Garmin. She was gracious enough to hold on to while it did its mating ritual with the hovering satellites and while I utilized the portotrough back inside the tent. I'd hoped that the knot in my thigh would loosen a bit during the remainder of the bike. It did not, so the run began more as a limp shuffle. I glanced at the Garmin, it was just after 6:00 PM. I had a sinking feeling that I couldn't immediately explain.

Coming out of transition we turn right and do a short out and back of just under a mile one way. The pact that I'd made with myself in T2 required me to run, limp, jog, or crawl the short out and back. Once back near the transition area, I could then stop if I wanted to and be ok with the decision. There is a long, wide concrete walkway that parallels the beach and sandwiches the running path adjacent to the transition area. It holds an amazing number of cheering spectators. It doesn't matter to them if you're on the first lap or second, whether you're walking or running, or whether you're smiling or crying - they want you to keep moving. They want you to succeed. They make you feel like a rock star, even when you feel like a train wreck.

Once I'd gotten past the first aid station, barely a half mile out of T2, I looked at my Garmin again to check the time of day. Wow, I couldn't believe it took me that long to finish the bike. I must have been stopped a lot longer than I realized and been much slower once I got rolling again. I started slogging through the mental calculations which due to an apparently missing math gene are challenging enough on a normal day. At best, I thought I could maintain a 15 minute mile pace walking. The race cut-off is midnight. At 12:01:01 you can cross the finish line but you are not an official finisher. There was no way I could cover 26 miles and some change in 6 hours at that pace. It was way too painful to actually run. I had tried and literally began to cry after a few steps. This was now a brutal exercise in futility. Even though I wanted to and was trying, I could not finish. Now it was really Decision Time.

This was one of the rare instances when I was glad to be a chronic procrastinator. I wasn't interested in making the decision just yet. Thoughts of futility hurt more than the thigh. I then began to distract myself with increasingly unrealistic scenarios that would enable me to finish before the cutoff. As I'm nervously asking myself how far off the deep end I'd really gone and actually *answering*, I started to wonder about the Garmin displaying the correct time. What if it reset itself inaccurately? What if the satellites didn't update the time to the correct time zone? What if I'm looking at the wrong data field? So I ask the next spectator I see with a watch, "what's the time of day?" She responded "about 4:15", "local time?" "yes", "really?!" She had noticed the Garmin and was now understandably perplexed and probably more than a little concerned about me. "Thanks for the help!" I mumbled as I limped past, working through the calculations one more time. Hmmm, this may actually work.

I was already well onto Lakeshore Drive, long done with the out & back along Rosenberry, before I realized I was well past the transition area and pre-determined decision point. There were more cheering hordes along Lakeshore. I'd gone a little over two miles and nothing hurt any less. More importantly, nothing hurt any more than it had previously. I wasn't ready to stop yet. "Fuck it", I said to myself, "I'm gonna go until I can't or until I hit the finish line" naively believing my body would actually hold up all the way. Had to keep moving as there was no time to waste and made my way out to Lake CdA Dr.

Inevitably, I saw Michele on the run and thought back to how this was supposed to be our first Ironman event together. Previously, we'd always do them individually so the partner could sherpa and provide support before, during, and after the IM event. As I was walking, she offered words of encouragement, presumably unaware of the truck incident. The only thing that hurt more than the charley horse trying to rip my right thigh apart was the bitter irony that our first IM together had become our first IM apart. I pressed onward.

It was great to see friends on the run course. I got to see Stayc once and Jess, Roy, and Danielle all twice. As I got close to the far turn-around on Lake CdA Drive on my first lap, Bobby Z caught up with me on his second lap. We walked together for a bit and it was awesome to actually talk to somebody. He'd told me about how well his bike went and that he was feeling decent on the run. I gave him the abridged version of the Truck incident. After wishing each other well, he started running again and I continued my broken walk while questioning both my sanity and resolve.

When I'd gotten to the halfway point of the marathon, I was pleasantly surprised at my progress, averaging just over 15 minute miles. It was time for further self assessment. In a rookie mistake, I'd forgotten to pack socks in my T2 bag. This forced me to use my considerably thinner biking socks in my running shoes. Though I'd cranked the laces tighter twice since T2, my feet were sliding around a lot inside the shoes. I could feel the blisters growing and one had already ruptured. My back was still very sore but I wasn't breathing heavily enough for that to be a significant hindrance. I had a few ibuprofen tablets left. Stomach had settled and nutrition wasn't a problem. The only major concern, other than overall pain management, was that my left thigh was beginning to fatigue dramatically from dragging my right leg along. I could afford to go a little slower on the second half but not much, and I didn't want to prolong the agony unnecessarily. Regardless, I was confident that I could make the cutoff and was determined to do so. I'd come way too far at this point to throw in the towel. Onward. Again.

It is an odd and eerie experience late at night on an Ironman run course. Outside of town, it is dark and desolate. At the far end of the course the only spectators are the helpful and encouraging volunteers at aid stations. There are high intensity portable lights set up along the path with large swaths of literal and figurative darkness in between. These breadcrumb beacons provide attainable mental milestones while reminding you of how far you have yet to go. Most people are walking at that point because if they could run, they'd already be finished. For the athletes, its a sick combination of persistence and despair after more than 14 hours of ass-kicking work, with miles yet to go. Beyond the cut off calculations clouding

every thought, you constant struggle with how hard to push, whether to push, and often how to prevent yourself from just lying down and quitting. Lonely souls often partner up with others moving about the same speed for solace, camaraderie, and encouragement; anything to take your mind off the suffering. I wanted no solace or camaraderie. More than Finishing, I wanted to be done.

I was somewhat excited to hit the far turn-around again on Lake CdA drive - another mental check mark indicating I was about 3/4 done with the death march. My spirits were temporarily lifted until I reached a clearing and could see the CdA Resort tower standing guard over downtown and the The Finish Line. It was so far away. The distance may as well have been fifty miles instead of the five it really was. How could I ever get back there? I trudged into the next aid station and ordered what had become The Usual for each mile: a coke, a cookie, and a water. At the end of the row of helpful and encouraging volunteers, a little girl held out her hands with a necklace. I expected a glowing halo that I'd seen most of the other athletes wearing after dark, but this was a thin strip of leather adorned with a small silver runner that twinkled in the portable lights. I stopped and bent down as she put it around my neck like a finisher medal and said excitedly, "way to go Ironman!" More tears, but not from the pain.

Like all the other spectators that enthusiastically cheered me late in the bike and on the run, she had no idea that I'd been in a serious wreck just hours before. They all just wanted me to succeed. All they could see was a person attempting something incredibly challenging, perhaps even inspiring, and they were moved to be a part of the experience. I've been both the spectator and the athlete and realize that one doesn't exist without the other. It is a mutually beneficial relationship that neither probably fully comprehends. The little girl with the necklace foreshadowed my fate and my spirits were once again light.

My unconscious disjointed rhythm carried me back into town. A few small pockets of spectators continued to offer encouragement. Surprisingly the partyers at the apartment complex were still out in full force with raucous music, high fives, and enough drunken enthusiasm to put a broad smile on my weary face. It wasn't quite State Street at IM WI but is felt just as good for a half a block. A few blocks later I walked past out rental house and dropped off my nutrition belt on the front steps while admiring the poster from Norm I'd hung on the railing that morning with the help of Stayc's parents. Just over a mile left. I was close.

*****The Finish*****

The last few blocks before I got up to Sherman were spent trying to decide if I wanted to try to run the actual finish. It was about seven blocks on a slight decline and it was going to hurt badly. I could cramp up and stumble, further injuring myself. About a half block from Sherman, a medal-clad athlete sat on the sidewalk cheering the rest of us in. He looked at me presciently and said, "you're really close. It's been a tough day and you're hurting, but you gotta run the finish. I know you can, so go enjoy it!" For all I know he may well have been an apparition summoned by my battered psyche and he probably said the same thing to all of the athletes coming through that late. Surely he didn't, but it just seemed like he knew what I'd been through. Clearly the fatigue and ibuprofen were taking their toll. I would

run. I didn't know how long or even if could, but I was going to try.

The turn onto Sherman was incredible. Tons of people lining the entire street. The insanely bright lights, blaring music, and a jacked-up Mike Riley providing the perfect Finish Line exclamation point. It was *beautiful*. I was ecstatic and spent. After a few quick steps of stabbing pain, I gradually found a new lopsided, slightly faster rhythm. I tried to convince my aching body that it would be over soon. After a block or two, the sharpness went away. Some of my friends were standing along the street cheering and giving high fives - I nearly missed them with my tunnel vision. Thankfully Jess nearly stepped out in front of me to get my attention. After another block I was on auto-pilot, letting the gravitational pull of The Finish Line carry me forward, painless and euphoric.

As I stepped across The Finish Line, a familiar face appeared seemingly out of nowhere and stepped in front of the catchers trying to help me regain my balance. Bobby Z and I had volunteered at the finish area the year before and had talked frequently about how much of an honor and how powerful it was to be able to place a finisher medal on the athletes. He now stood grinning before me, after waiting around a couple hours for me to finish, and took the medal from around his neck and placed it over my head. There were no words. None were needed. I hugged him and didn't care that I couldn't hold back the tears. That was the toughest couple of hundred meters between Start and Finish that I had ever traveled. Karma Withdrawal #3.

*****Epilogue*****

Lots of people ask how I could finish, or what drives a person to get back on their bike after being hit by a pick up truck. I don't have an easy answer, mostly because I'm not entirely sure myself. Certainly my experiences of late in dealing with adversity were helpful because I never panicked or got too worked up about stuff during the big day. While all of this may make for an interesting story, it doesn't seem all that epic to me right now - partly because I was able to work through it and partly because I know there are more challenges ahead of me to be dealt with. Everyone goes through challenges each day regardless of whether they're doing an Ironman, being pummeled by turning vehicles, or just trying to make themselves a better person. We all suffer and we all have the capacity to overcome.

I am an amazingly fortunate individual. Not just because I survived and was able to get back on the bike or finish the event, though those things are part of my remarkable fortune, but more so because of the extraordinary people both near and far that I have been able to associate with and depend on. I belong to an awesome "village" of supportive people. I am extremely grateful for all of them and realize none of this could have been possible without their love, encouragement, support, and occasional well-intentioned ass-kicking. Thank you all! I would love to someday be able to return the favor or at least be a useful example of decisions not to make. :)

Carpe Diem!