

## Half IM

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Seven months of training under my belt, both a triathlon and a swim coach that tell me I'm ready, yet I'm still anxious. This is partly due to the weather. The forecast is for rain, the thermometer reads 40 degrees, and the fog is thick as pea soup as I drive to Tupper Lake. Mostly, however, I wonder if I have what it takes to finish a half Ironman. The individual legs: 1.2 mile swim, 56 mile bike, and 13.1 mile run are all comfortable distances. However, slapping them all together with no rest in between might be more than I'm ready for. My big fear is that I'll use up my legs on the bike and have to walk much of the half marathon.

Registration was yesterday, so all I have to do is rack my bike, get my body marked, and show up for the start. It is now an hour and a half till the start. It's important to get to a triathlon early, if for no other reason than to stand in the long queues for the port-a-johns. First things first while the lines are shortest. Unpack the bike, pump up the tires (always to maximum pressure) and lube the chain. On the way over to the transition area, stop and get tattooed. The number 675 is now prominently displayed in big black numbers on my left arm, right thigh, and left calf. Lucked out with a great spot under a tree in the transition area. This will make it easier to find and be drier if it does rain today, though the fog has lifted and rain is looking less likely.

After laying out my gear, saying hello to some friends, and stretching, it is time to squeeze into my wetsuit. It is still pretty chilly as I make my way barefoot to the start. My swim cap is white and I'll start with wave five. There will be six waves in all, each 5 minutes apart. The first wave is for the sprint (a shorter race being run concurrently) and the remaining waves are ordered by age. The wave before mine has red caps and the wave after green.

At 08:00 an air-horn blows and the first wave is off. Everybody applauds. Twenty more minutes and it's my turn. My feet are going numb from the cold while I pass the time chatting. At 08:15, the fourth wave is turned loose and we are allowed to get into the water. It is almost seventy degrees and considerably warmer than the air temperature. The swim course is marked with bright orange buoys and is the shape of a huge triangle. We will go out along one leg and come back on the other, finishing back at the transition area a good 500m from here along the

beach. The sun will be in our eyes on the return so the tinted goggles should help.

I choose to start well to the side, letting the animals after podium positions deal with the mêlée in the center. All I want is to find a comfortable rhythm and go. There is the blast that signals the start! I hit the red button on my watch and start swimming. The water is full of silt and it's difficult to see. I'd like to draft off somebody and save my strength for later, but this strategy is turning out to be more challenging than expected. The faster swimmers are already away and the ones that can be caught are not going fast enough to bother with, so I'm on my own. The dark water and tinted lenses make it difficult to see other swimmers in their black wetsuits. About five minutes into the swim, an elbow to the jaw sets my teeth on edge. The buoys are coming faster now. Soon, I hit the last one and turn.

The group has thinned out considerably at this point and I have already caught a number of red caps. The buoys on the way back seem to be farther apart and are difficult to sight. A green cap passes me halfway back. With luck, he is just a fast swimmer who is part of a relay team and not the vanguard of a green wave. Onward. Soon my hand touches bottom. I stagger to my feet and jog up the soft sand race organizers have thoughtfully placed here. My watch reads 36 minutes and change and a friend cheers me on. One down, two to go, runs through my head as I jog through the transition area.

Getting out of the wetsuit is always the trickiest part, but all goes well. I take a little extra time here to dry my feet and put on socks. Both arm warmers and a jacket are waiting, but the weather has steadily improved and I opt to use neither. In all, I spend just under four minutes in the transition area. Heading out, I only cross over a corner of the timing mat that will leave me wondering if my split has been recorded until the final results are posted.

The bike course is a simple out and back along Route 3. The road is open to traffic so we must stay to the right. The terrain is best described as rolling hills. As we go out, I notice that either I'm dead or my heart rate monitor is not working. Favoring the latter, I fuss with the chest strap but to no avail. All my training has been done with a heart rate monitor so this is serious. Just great! I'm flying without instruments. Looks like I'll have to try to navigate using perceived level of exertion. Ugh! My fear, using up my legs before the run, has now grown teeth.

At mile two, we hit the first hill and I start to pass people. Even though I'm not a particularly strong

climber, riding in Westchester has its advantages. I'm trying to stay in an aero position as much as possible. Riding with aerobars is like having your own private pace line and it makes a big difference since this is a non-drafting event. At mile 10 is the first aid station and I take a half banana. I have a bento box full of power gel to consume along the rest of the ride. Eating and riding at the same time is actually something that you have to train your body to do. The problem with gel though, is that you need to wash it down with a lot of liquid and the last thing you want when your hunkered down in an aero position is a full belly.

Perfect circles, high cadence, and damn heart rate monitor is what is on my mind as I pedal. I pass some and others pass me. The ones that come roaring by on the fancy tri-bikes don't bother me at all. As long as a fat guy on a mountain bike does not pass me, I guess I'm doing just fine. I try to work out all the simple fractions: 14 miles is  $1/4$  of the way, 28 is  $1/2$  of the way, my addled brain struggles with  $56/3$ . The mileage is marked on the road every 5 miles and each sign passed lifts my spirits. I cruise through several aid stations without taking anything. With two bottles of sports drink and lots of gel, there is no need. The turn around is at a rest stop. Switch my bottles, apply some chamois cream, and I'm off again. I'm halfway done with the bike leg and feeling pretty strong but better save something for the big hill at the end.

A look at my watch tells me that I'm making very good time and I stand an excellent chance of finishing in less than 6 hours. I have deliberately not set a time goal for myself, but would be thrilled with an under 6-hour finish. On and on I pedal and the miles slowly tick by. It sure is pretty, have to come back and ride up here just for fun sometime. At the next aid station I literally snatch another half banana. At around the 50-mile mark a last gel sets me up for the hill and the start of the run. Somehow, magically, the hill proves to be much milder than anticipated and the last few miles are all downhill. I love descending! Perhaps I'm just a downwardly mobile guy...

I slow as I approach transition, dismount, and re-rack my bike. My bike split is under three hours! This is a good half-hour faster than expected. T2 is much faster than T1 and I'm out in less than two minutes. My legs are all pumped up. I sloppily smear on sunscreen as I run. Almost immediately, the course heads uphill. Pushing the useless chest strap down to my waist, the sensor flops around to my back prompting a passing runner to ask if I have a pulse in my ass. Everybody's a comedian. At mile one I grab

some water and soak a bandana, which I sling around my neck. What an about-face the weather has taken. I've gone from worrying about hypothermia to watching out for sunburn. Mile two has passed and we are still climbing! My legs have loosened up quite a bit but my quads are on the verge of cramping.

At mile three the course has finally leveled off. Phew! A mile or so of flat and we are headed back down the hill. Nine miles to go which is just a Sunday morning run. Three miles of downhill goes by quickly. A few minutes later I hit the halfway point. Under an hour so far on the run! If I don't crash and burn, I could finish well under 5:45. I've been trying not to push too hard because I *really* want to run the whole thing. Still, I'm running a sub 9 minute pace which seems too fast so I try to dial back but am somehow stuck in this rhythm. Onward I plod. Another mile or so and we come off the road onto a dirt track. It feels nice to get off the asphalt.

At mile 8, a nasty surprise is waiting. It is a quad buster of a hill. Slowing my pace dramatically, I struggle up the hill. If I'm going to cramp up, it's going to happen now. Somehow, I make it to the crest without my legs seizing. Just 5 miles to go, but the mile markers seem to be getting farther apart. This half of the run is much nicer than the first. A lot of the course is on trails, some on dirt roads, and the rest on roads with no traffic. At mile 9 there is another hill but it pales by comparison with the monster just a mile back. Ever so slowly, I pass the mile 10 marker. At mile 11, I'm back on the main road and will be done in less than 20 minutes. At this point, I know that it's all downhill from here. Euphoria settles over me because I have no doubt that I'll be able to finish strong. The last aid station is at mile 12 where I take my last sip of water and push on.

A quarter mile to go and I can see the finish. I'm passed by a couple of runners. It's the last 100m and time to use it or lose it, so I give it all I have and overtake four runners to finish. My official time is 5:38:16. I collect a finisher medal and later learn that I have placed 316 out of 699.