

Journey to an Ironman

By Andrea Packard

Most of us are familiar with the saying: “It’s all about the journey, not the destination.” Now that I have completed my first Ironman triathlon, I have a new-found appreciation for those words of wisdom, and I can honestly say that the journey meant more to me than the destination. When I speak of the journey, I am not referring to just the race itself, or even the year of training and preparation that I went through. Those two things only represent the final chapter of the entire journey which I will recount for you.

It all began more than 2 decades ago on an ordinary Sunday morning. I don’t recall the exact date, or even the exact year, but I’m estimating it was around 1990. I was in the living room reading the Sunday newspaper when I came across an article about an Ironman triathlon. At the time I was a fairly serious competitive high school and USS swimmer, and I had competed in one season of cross country, but I knew very little about triathlons, and this was the first I had ever heard of the insane endurance test known as an Ironman. Guess what? As soon as I read about it, I thought to myself, “I bet I could do that.” I said as much to my dad, who laughed it off as a typical comment from a competitive teenager who couldn’t grasp the concept of just how difficult an Ironman would be. I wasn’t bothered by his reaction, because I knew that doing an Ironman was a long-term life goal and not anything of immediate consideration. A very important thing happened that day: the seed of my Ironman dream was planted.

Fast-forward a few years to the summer of 1993, right after I graduated from high school. I figured if I was ever going to pursue my Ironman dream, I had to start somewhere, and I told my parents I wanted a road bike for my graduation present. It was difficult to squeeze in the biking and running training among the 20+ hours of swimming I was doing at the time, but somehow I managed, and I completed my first ever triathlon. It was only a sprint (500 yard swim, 11 mile bike and 5k run), and it was the most grueling physical challenge I had ever undertaken in my life, but it was start at least. Unfortunately that first race left me with painful shin splints, and with that came the realization that triathlon training is very physically demanding, and not something one can do “on the side.” Since I was going to be on the swim team in college, I knew I needed to be 100% focused on that sport, so I decided to postpone my triathlon ambitions until my college swimming career was over.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be to just switch from being a competitive swimmer to a triathlete. Biking didn’t pose a problem – it was the running. Any time I tried to run, even just short distances, those shin splints came back with a vengeance. I tried different shoes; I tried easing into the running very slowly; I read every book and article I could about preventing or treating shin splints. Nothing helped. In hindsight, I suspect I had significant leg muscle imbalances from years of breaststroke, and my legs were accustomed to the gravity-free environment of the water, so my shins just couldn’t take the stress of running. By about 1998, at age 23, I had pretty much given up on ever doing an Ironman. Instead of putting my dream on the back burner, it was easier to kill it and accept the fact that I “couldn’t run.”

Right about that time I started dating my husband, and soon my life was occupied with marriage, running a business, and having children. Before the kids came, my husband and I spent a couple years dabbling in the world of rock climbing, but when our schedules just couldn’t accommodate it anymore, I returned to my old and familiar standby for exercise: swimming. I joined a Masters swim team and for 2 years I tore up the competitive



scene, and even improved on some of my best times from college. It was a fun time for me as an athlete, but that wasn't all that I wanted to be. I wanted to be a mom too, and so I took a break from the heavy competition from 2002-2006 and had my children. (Note however, that I did not take a break from swimming – I was at masters practice the morning each of my children was born, and swam in a meet while pregnant with my daughter).

In early 2006, we sold our business, moved from New Hampshire to North Carolina, bought another business, and settled into our new life. Swimming was still a centerpiece in my daily schedule, and I found a wonderful new team and started competing again. But after a few years, swimming lost its allure. I still enjoyed swimming for the sake of exercise, but since I am a driven, type-A person, if I don't have a goal I quickly lose interest in things. I had no swimming goals, and I couldn't seem to come up with any that excited me. I took several weeks off to figure things out, and one of the first days I returned to the pool, in January 2008, I saw something that awakened a long-lost dream: an advertisement for a sprint triathlon at our very own YMCA in New Bern. I saw it as a “sign” (no pun intended) that maybe someday I could do that Ironman after all. Just thinking about running brought back painful memories of shin splits, but I thought, “What do I have to lose?” It had been 10 years since I had done any running whatsoever, so maybe things would be different this time. I dusted off my bike and eased myself into running. I was pleasantly surprised that the shin splints didn't come back! But as luck would have it, I was plagued instead with peroneal tendonitis. My run training was “compromised” to say the least, but I completed the race, and I shocked myself with a 3rd place overall female finish. I was hooked!

I eventually overcame the tendonitis and for the next 2 years completed a few sprint races and 2 half-ironmen. Slowly but surely, I was inching further toward that Ironman. In the process I learned quite a bit about every aspect of triathlons, from equipment to nutrition to training plans to my own body's limitations. But it was not an easy beginning to a triathlon career: I suffered one major injury and a few minor ones, and battled frequent sinus infections (thanks to my allergies and young children bringing home every respiratory virus known to man). Eventually, persistent aches and pains on my left side led me to take another break from triathlons. I thought that if I returned to just swimming for a while my body would heal itself and I could then resume the Ironman journey. Of course, if I was to “just swim,” I had to come up with a goal. A BIG one. Sure enough, as luck would have it, about that time one of my fellow Masters team-mates mentioned the 25K open water swim to be held in the summer of 2011. That was just the impetus I needed! The detour to pursue this swimming race was an amazing one, and I will forever be glad I took my focus off the Ironman long enough to experience an ultra-distance open water swim.

What surprised me, however, was that despite no biking and running for well over a year, my body didn't heal. I was able to swim with just occasional discomfort, but my day-to-day life was burdened with mild but nagging pain. Being a believer in chiropractic techniques and active release, I tried that route but with little or no lasting results. In desperation, I tried not exercising at ALL for a while, but that didn't make any difference. Finally in the fall of 2011, after several negative medical tests for everything from stress fractures to arthritis to herniated discs, I was sent to a physical therapist who suspected my ailments were mostly referred pain from my back. I was skeptical, but did my prescribed exercises faithfully. Some days I was convinced the exercises were helping, and other days I thought maybe they were making things worse. Meanwhile, the physical therapist pointed out that if I didn't feel any better NOT running, I might as well try running again. She put me on a very conservative plan of walking and running, and meanwhile I also resumed a bit of biking. To this day, I really can't pinpoint any one thing that made the ultimate difference, but thankfully some combination of the physical therapy exercises and the return to ‘land based’ exercise got me on the road to recovery. The most important thing I finally came to realize and accept was that having pain free days was not a given anymore. There was not some mystical time in the future when my body would be permanently cured. I was going to have to figure out what combination of what types of exercise would keep the pain and discomfort at bay. Even a year later I still struggle to keep the puzzle together: it's a daily battle and a delicate balancing act. For me, there is no “magic pill.”

As I gradually worked more and more biking and running into my weekly schedule, I starting thinking about what my next goal should be. I felt as though I was emerging from a mental and physical low point in my life, but something was telling me that I should go for that Ironman once and for all. Perhaps when we are “down and

out,” that is the best time to aim the highest to get out of the slump. And thus began the final chapter in this story.

My logical selection for my first Ironman was the Beach 2 Battleship in Wilmington. Several factors worked in my favor: the date of the race was October 20, 2012, roughly one year away. The location was less than a 2 hour drive from home, which would save me travel time, headaches and money. A fall race would ensure I didn't have to deal with excessive heat, and the course was about as beginner-friendly as it could be (current assisted swim, and pancake flat bike and run). Last but not least, the race was not like other Ironmen that typically fill up months in advance – I knew I wouldn't have to fork over the hefty (\$500 for those not familiar with sport) entry fee until the last minute. So although I had my mind set on the race and began creating a year-long plan to get to the starting line, I didn't announce my intentions to anyone (even my husband!). It is a little ironic, and even a little embarrassing, that I was so utterly secretly committed to the race, and yet I couldn't bring myself to officially announce to the world that I was in fact going to DO IT. I guess the all too powerful pessimist in me was fearful that injury, illness, or some other life event would keep me from getting to the starting line in one piece, and I didn't want to have to explain to anyone why I didn't do the race after all.

As winter rolled into spring, I stayed focused on week-to-week goals and kept myself motivated with several shorter distance races in the upcoming months. During that time, when asked what I was training for, I began dropping hints that I hoped to do a long race, perhaps my first Ironman, in the fall. I kept on with the increasingly long workouts, somehow survived a month-long bout with bronchitis without too much missed training, and by the beginning of September started feeling like it was really going to happen. But then I came down with a cold, and between that and some other personal things that were going on in my life, I was suddenly ready to throw in the towel. Fortunately, my amazing and understanding husband convinced me to stay on track and not give up. I took a couple days off to get better, to get my head back in the game, and to adapt my training plan to maximize my chances of staying healthy until October 20. By Columbus Day weekend I had the hardest training behind me, which was quite an accomplishment in and of itself (those last 3 weekends each consisted of a 5000 yard swim, 85 – 100 mile bike ride, and 16-19 mile run). It was time to pull the trigger, and so I went online and signed up. I was officially (and financially) committed!

Eventually race day arrived. I had trained and planned, planned and trained, and now there was nothing left to do but execute my plan to the best of my ability. Of course just like anything in life, you can plan to a certain extent, but there will always be factors outside your control. Call it fate, divine intervention, or just plain good luck, but all of those “uncontrollable things” worked in my favor that day. First, the weather could not have been better! I was so happy and relieved that it was warm but not hot, with sunshine and only light winds. That factor alone made my day infinitely more enjoyable. Secondly, I had no mechanical problems or flat tires on the bike portion. And thirdly, the volunteers were awesome! I felt grateful all day long for this good fortune. I also spent many of those 140 miles thanking the numerous people in my life that had played some part, however large or small, in helping me along the way (there are far too many to list and I fear I would inadvertently miss someone). Without a doubt, I could not have realized this big dream by myself.

And what about those parts of my race plan that I controlled? I will put humility aside and say that I performed like a rock star! I knew I would do well in the swim, as it is by far my strong suit, and I achieved my goal of being first woman out of the water (I later discovered only 4 men were ahead of me). As for the bike, I was patient, disciplined, and kept my ego in check while hundreds of fellow triathletes passed me. I was prepared for that, and remained solely focused on keeping my heart rate in a specific target zone, and maintaining a pedal cadence of 90 rpm. My conservative pacing strategy was rewarded, and I was able to not only negative-split the bike, but also to pass several competitors from mile 60 onward. When it came to the run (my first marathon), I stuck faithfully to a plan of taking a 1 minute walking break at each aid station (they were positioned at roughly each mile marker). I had to force myself to stop and walk those first few miles, but it wasn't long before I was looking forward to those bouts of walking. A friend's words of wisdom, “Walk before you have to” rang true. I was very much in control and not plagued with any cramps or other musculoskeletal ailments. The only thing that threatened to undo me was nausea that started ever so innocently at about the half-way point of the bike and worsened steadily throughout the run. I had experienced this during my last few training rides, and despite making some adjustments to my nutrition, fell victim to it during the race. By mile 16, I couldn't force myself to

eat or drink anything. All I could do was suck and chew on ice chips. So as I approached the final turnaround at mile 20, I started to think about how best to manage the homestretch. I was concerned that I would bonk any minute since I wasn't taking in any calories, and I was also afraid of tripping and falling on some of the poorly lit sections. As I did the math in my head, I reached the conclusion that even if I walked the final 6 miles at a pace of 15 minutes per mile, I would still finish just under 13 hours (my best-case scenario estimate going into the day). I decided it was not worth attempting to maintain a 10-minute mile pace, which might result in a serious collapse that would prevent me from crossing the finish line. And so I slowed down, and fell into a more tolerable rhythm of 5 minutes walking, 5 minutes running (or something along those lines...it's really a blur). Ironically, miles 21-25 were probably the most rewarding of the whole race. It turned out that giving in to the nausea and backing off was just what I needed to bring the whole experience back into perspective. I was not out there to get a podium spot or beat a certain time; I was there to become an Iron(wo)man, regardless of how long it took. It was just a matter of one foot in front of the other, and eventually I'd get there. I will never forget the flood of emotions that overcame me as I approached the final turn and listened to the crowd of cheering spectators that awaited me on the homestretch. What a fantastic sound that was! I couldn't yet see the finish line, but I knew it was within reach. I came around the corner and it was just as I had visualized, only this time it was real. My husband reached over the fence to give me a high five as I ran by. Tears came to my eyes as I pumped my arms in victory and achieved a goal that had been more than 2 decades in the making. I know that those last few moments will forever be a high point in my life. But, more importantly, what I realize upon reflection is that they are meaningless when taken out of context. They merely represent a fantastic and fitting end to a truly marvelous journey.