

AN ANGEL PUSHED ME TO THE FINISH LINE BY WES ELY

Ask any normal, vaguely athletic guy his opinion on running a marathon, and he'll almost always reply with something akin to saying, "That would be really hard." Ask that same average guy what an Ironman competition entails and he probably won't even know.

On June 25, 2006, Wes Ely (Tulane '85), a research doctor at Vanderbilt's medical center, found out why he had trained for 22 weeks for an Ironman, logging 362 hours of workouts, 208,200 yards of swimming, 3,130 miles of biking and 603 miles of running: so he could appreciate 22 weeks of training, logging 362 hours of workouts, 208,200 yards of swimming, 3,130 miles of biking and 603 miles of running.

His journey was his payoff.

by Wes Ely

More than 2,200 people showed up to compete in this, my first Ironman competition, and one out of eight eventually did not finish. Tough crowd.

The attrition was astounding on the marathon. The majority finished the race primarily by walking, and I mean barely walking. I ran the last ten miles in a sub-nine-minute pace, but it all depended on my sacrificing speed on the bike. Here is what happened.

The expected water temperature was 70 degrees, and my wetsuit was geared for 75. Boy, was I wrong. It was ten degrees colder in the water.

With 2,200 bathing caps and wetsuits on the beach, we entered the water as a mass start. Many Ironman vets later told me it was the most violent swim in which they'd ever taken part. One guy got kicked in the stomach and vomited, then aspirated and went under as a lady used his head as a fulcrum to push herself forward. I looked at my heart-rate monitor and saw a 148. I knew I needed to get out of the fray.

So I just took my time and swam to a clearing. Then I noticed that my legs were really cramping. I couldn't figure out why because I knew it wasn't fatigue. When I finished, I knew exactly why: I was hypothermic big time.

Shivering and unable to get out of the chair for the first transition from swimming to biking, I just thought, "How am I going to get out of this?"

Warm up on the bike? That was easier said than done. For the first hour, we were in shade. I couldn't shift or pull the brakes, and my teeth were chattering like crazy. People passed me at will, and I was just trying not to wreck. I eventually warmed up, and with what I had left, did the hill climbs, ate, drank, ate more, drank more and watched my heart rate.

The Ironman is basically an eating contest, seeing who can take in enough calories. I was doing about 350 calories an hour, plus one bottle of Accelerade and water per aid station. Between the wind, heat and tons of cheering spectators, I just took it all in. I started to enjoy the beauty of the Idaho scenery. I just thought of the blessing it was to be able to do this and overall enjoyed a leisurely bike at a much slower pace than I ever anticipated, at an average of 16 miles per hour versus my usual 19.

My second 56 miles, though, were exactly the same pace as my first, and many others slowed tremendously for having gone out too fast. I passed the ambulances taking wrecked athletes away – one guy's entire face was covered with blood – and the rest of us prayed for them and for our continued safety.

Then came the second transition, from biking to running. I put myself in the mindset of how I'd trained, the idea that every triathlon leg is independent. I was pretending that I was leaving my house for a long run on any given Saturday. Around mile five, however, I was dizzy and I knew that there was no way I could do the race if I didn't get resuscitated.

I saw some medical personnel and jokingly asked, "Hey, are you giving out free liters?" They laughed and I realized that it wasn't a good idea to order an IV. I figured I'd have to do this myself.

So, at the next aid station I tried to figure out how I was going to accomplish this when my stomach couldn't tolerate another calorie gel or Powerbar, and there was no way I could eat bananas or grapes.

I then heard some angel ask for chicken broth. Something clicked in my head, and I tried it. The broth went down very easily. I just sat there for a few minutes chugging a hypertonic saline mixture backed up with water to equate some semblance of normal saline resuscitation. I was thinking like a doctor, not an athlete.

It worked. In about 15 minutes I was a new guy. I packed my hat with ice and calculated how to get to the finish line as quickly and safely as possible.

Written on the street in chalk it said, "Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot. Do that another 22,000 times and you'll finish!" Hundreds of athletes who had passed me on the bike were now walking and overpopulating the medical tent. One by one I passed them.

I just kept saying the rosary in my head. "Teach me something new, Lord," I remember asking. I finished one lap and had 13.1 miles to go. I decided to run ten-minute miles as best I could, and every mile I was able to beat that goal by at least a minute. Between sponges, water, soup and Coke, I felt better and better.

At the end I was running as if I had not done that 2.4-mile swim. Or been hypothermic. Or biked 112 miles in the blazing heat. Or was finishing a marathon. I was just running.

I was running towards an archway with a lot of people cheering. A guy was on my heels. I think saw the number “42” on my left calf, showing my age, and wanted to pass me. To that I said no.

It turned out he was in the same age group and figured he’d increase his standing by one. Again I wasn’t going to let that become a possibility. I ran ahead, and with 50 or so yards to go, my wife Kim and my girls Blair, Brooke and Taylor came out of the crowd cheering, ready to run with me.

We all ran across the finish line holding hands as the time read 12 hours, 51 minutes and 33 seconds. It was a beautiful day.

I finished 128th in an age group of approximately 400 guys, and 755th overall. I didn’t set any speed records, but that’s not at all what it was about.

So what was it about? Well, I always regretted not doing triathlons with my childhood friend, Stephen Teagle, who competed in them to help lungs that were becoming riddled by cystic fibrosis. For years I’ve thought of him in the water, and no doubt he knows that as he looked down at my Ironman from heaven’s gates.

As another reason, I recently walked into our bedroom and my wife had put up a small card that read, “It is good to have an end to journey towards, but it is the journey that matters in the end.”

That’s it. It has been about the journey. Even if I hadn’t gotten out of the mess that I found myself in during the first transition and the bike, the six months I spent training was a great journey. And I am more thankful than ever for the blessings that came to me during that time of prayer over those hundreds of hours.

That is what the Ironman is all about. Getting closer.