

American Zofingen

Sunday, May 20



- 5 mile run (52.27 - 10:56 pace)
- 29 mile bike (1:57:44 - 14.5 mph avg)
- 5 mile run (58:10 - 13:03 pace)
- 29 mile bike (2:23:54 – 12.0 mph avg)
- 5 mile run (1:04:55 – 13:45 pace)
- 46 overall of 48 (26% DNF rate), #8 age group (of 8)

Tuesday May 15:

Normally, these things start with me waking up at four in the morning, loading up the truck, and getting lost on my way to the race. This race report is different because this race genuinely scared me, and did so the Tuesday before it even started.

On Monday, Withrow casually threw out the possibility that he might have a slot or two open for something called the “Zoff” in upstate New York, where there will be a hilly bike course and some trail runs. Perfect training, I think, and further, my Mom is in town so she can take some of the heat off Val when it comes to parenting the weasels.

Withrow sent me a link for the race, which I couldn’t open at work for some reason, but I check with my wife and get the thumbs up. She asks where it is, I say I don’t know, she asks how long it is, I say I don’t know, she asks how long it should take me, I say, I don’t know.

Monday night I confirm to Withrow, after a night out with clients, that I can do the race, and Tuesday I roll into the office and check a couple race reports from prior years.

Within minutes I can feel my stomach tighten and the hair on the back of my neck is standing on end. This race is killing people. There are videos posted on YouTube of competitors staring blankly at the camera, beyond exhaustion, looking at their wives and whispering “this is a disaster” before turning back onto the trail.

These people are suffering, are in a state of genuine and murderous pain, and unless I can come up with a plausible excuse pronto, I am going to be one of them in just a few days.

Damn you, Withrow.

Sunday, May 20:

I'm in the truck and headed up the Thruway on time with all my gear tucked away.

I have a cooler full of fluids, all kinds of lotions and balms, two kinds of shoes for the trail, and my usual array of actual food to eat (chocolate covered espresso beans, organic food bars, and in a nod to Z-Man, jelly beans).

The drive to New Paltz was straightforward and pretty, though as I exited and began to wend my way into the mountains it became quite clear how tough the bike was going to be.

This is a small enough race that the check in packet included a t-shirt and your number. And that's it.

I parked the truck, grabbed all my stuff, and located Withrow in the staging area, itself a reflection of the cult-like nature of the race: with just a handful of people dumb enough to compete in this race the transition area itself was tiny, almost cartoonishly small, everyone seemed to know each other, sharing tribal greetings and dress, and most appeared to have done this thing multiple times.

I spread out all my stuff and watched as the long course folks set off.

The prior night the girls helped me get ready and saw me trying to figure out how to attach food to my bike, and Leonie offered up a plastic hot dog tray of hers that was roughly the same width as my top tube. What the hell, I figured, and zip-tied the thing to the Silver Missile, making the bike look even more ridiculous than it already does. The sides were a little shallow, but a couple pieces of strategically placed athletic tape seemed to do a decent job of holding a bar in place.

I racked the Silver Missile, once again shamed by a rather spectacular collection of road racing and tri bikes surrounding me (oh, Pinarello, you temptress).

Withrow dropped by my outpost and his gaze lingered on the hot dog tray (which was helpfully labeled "hot dog" in bright red letters) on the top tube.

"Food storage" I volunteered.

Wordlessly, he pulled out his camera to grab a few photos. As I fiddled with the tape, he simply said "so ghetto".

I was introduced around to his Endurance Nation teammates, a solid group of folks who generated really positive energy and were all looking forward to the event.

By 7:45 I was chipped, bathed in sunscreen, full of water, chatting with a bunch of people and in good spirits, and ready to get going.

I whispered "finish this" to myself as I checked my laces a last time.

Run One:

I've fallen in with a few of the Endurance Nation folks, who appear to share my affinity for starting a race dead last.

The race director explains the course, and notes of himself and the volunteers in the pavilion that "we will be right here drinking beer and making fun of you."

And then we're off. I promise to myself that I won't pass anyone at all, given I am totally unfamiliar with the course and there are two more opportunities to be fast before the day is done. I settle into a relaxed lope at the back of the pack, chat with some of the other folks, and let my legs warm up.

The ascents are tough, following single-track trails up into the woods.

The flats and descents are laid out on carriage trails, and after the first half of the trail run I settle upon a sensible strategy of walking up and running down, popping the occasional jelly bean into my mouth, and keeping half an eye on my heart rate.

The sun is up and it is warming in the meadows, but it is cool under the already dense canopy of the trail, the scenery is stunning and I feel loose and relaxed. I run what feels to be a very lazy eleven minute pace, but am mindful of the effort required, even while this fresh, to get up the steeper sections of the trail.

Bike One:

I am, at best, a weak cyclist.

Throwing a leg over the Silver Missile just outside of transition, I have to calm myself as I push forward onto the gravel pathway that leads to the singular hell of the Zofingen bike course.

The course has the subtlety of a rhinoceros.

After a jarring trip down the gravel path, the moment you make it onto pavement you are pointed directly up a hill that is shockingly steep, and shockingly long. Laboring up in my smallest ring (the Missile has a granny gear, mercifully, and I spend half the race in it) sweat is pouring off me and my breathing is strained.

When I am finally treated to the sight of the top of this hill, I have barely a moment to collect myself before I am flying, at 45 miles per hour, down the backside and taking unknown off-camber, decreasing-radius turns in the half-light and long shadows of dawn.

It is terrifying, and I ride my brakes where I can as I am hoping to avoid death.

The course makes a hard right and smoothes itself, and I work my way through the food in my hot dog tray and half a bottle of Man Juice (the vaguely unsettling name I have bestowed upon my home-made sport drink which is simply green tea with agave syrup and salt, so that each bottle on my bike is worth 120 calories and has a teaspoon of sodium).

I follow my typical plan of picking someone who appears to share my basic fitness profile and keeping them in my sights, to be modified as necessary by frequent heart rate checks.

This worked extremely well on the very flat Devilman course. This does not work at Zofingen. The hills are so brutal, so long, and so incredibly frequent I feel that I am in some kind of MC Escher painting where the path I follow is somehow always going up, regardless of direction: an infinite, ascending Mobius strip.

It doesn't matter who I follow or what their pace is, because surely we shall all die.

The whole idea of managing my pace for the first bike loop gives way to simply surviving the bike and figuring out what to do about the rest of the race later.

There are endless switchbacks, false tops, brief dips allowing kernels of hope to develop only to be subsequently crushed by brutal, leg-crushing inclines, grades present themselves that are geometrically impossible, and there is still no sign of the end.

At one point, a quiet side road takes me uphill past the distinct sound of cool running water, and it is all but impossible not to throw myself over the guardrail into the clear mountain stream that has broadened to pool and fill a hollow in a granite plinth.

After some ceaseless amount of pedaling, I am directed to make a turn back toward the transition, just two miles to go before this loop is complete.

Those final two miles are all uphill, of course.

Run Two:

It is such a relief to be off the bike course that despite the shellshock of the ride, I find myself happily lacing up my shoes in transition. I down water, a couple coffee beans, pull my hat on and get my legs turning over up and through the pavilion. I grab a slice of watermelon, notice multiple kegs stacked against the wall, and a bottle of Jameson's.

Truly, these are my people.

After the battering my body endures on the bike leg, I formulate a plan. The plan is to try to recover from the bike leg on the trail.

Of course, this is complicated by the fact that the trail is now noticeably steeper and more technical than it was on the first lap, when my legs were fresh and my mind was clear. I am stumbling over rocks and exposed roots, and the moment the trail presents uphill sections I slow to a walk.

I grab a drink at the aid station and proceed to the back half of the trail run. As I descend clumsily toward a duckboarded section of riverbed, a pair of hikers and a dog turn a corner in front of me, forcing me to spring off my right leg to avoid plowing wholesale into the woman, an outcome that would have ended badly for all of us, but primarily for her.

In doing so, I set off a chain of twinges along my right leg that ends, to my horror, in a vicious cramp along the inside of my thigh. I pull up, and try to figure out how to stretch it out but in doing so other muscles threaten to cramp.

I'm glued to the spot I am standing in, worried about how to continue, and suddenly it occurs to me that I have another 29 mile bike loop, and another 5 miles of this trail, to go before I get anywhere near that bottle of whiskey.

The hikers look at me nervously. I am drenched with sweat, sunscreen is running in rivers down my body, I am panting and grabbing my leg with both hands, thumbs pressed into my thigh as hard as I can to try to force the muscle to release while cursing like a sailor. I can't get enough force on the muscle with my thumbs, so I ball my left hand into a fist and punch my thigh as hard as I can.

The muscle gives, a little. I brace my leg against a tree and punch it as hard as I can, four or five times, each time gasping with effort and pain, but it's working.

"Are you OK?" the woman I nearly crushed timidly asks. The man, keeping his eyes on me, slowly takes a few steps backward. If he had bear spray, he would have been reaching for it.

"Fine", I say between punches, "I'm fine. Have a great day." The cramp lets go, and I turn and head back across the duckboards.

The back half of the second lap is occupied exclusively by two thoughts: my legs, specifically the muscle that has cramped, as it keeps wanting to cramp again. Looming larger, however, is the realization that I am about to get on my bike and take another lap of that twenty-nine mile horror show. Given how much trouble I am in right now, and the fact that it is getting warmer by the minute, I begin to seriously doubt my ability to finish the bike course a second time.

Which means I am worried about whether or not I can finish this race, and I am barely halfway done with hours to go.

Before I enter into a destructive loop of panic and self-doubt, I force myself to think about exactly what I will do in the transition area, in sequence, and repeat it over and over to myself.

I will take off my hat. I will put on my helmet and gloves. I will put on my cycling jersey, to protect my neck and shoulders from the sun. I will drink the coco water I have in the cooler, I will eat, I will pack two bars into my jersey and one in my (absurd) bento box, I will clean the lenses of my sunglasses, and I will leave the transition area and start the bike.

My concern is that that if I stay a moment too long in transition and start to think about the ride, I will not leave.

My transition takes over six minutes but I methodically go through my checklist and push myself onto the bike course before I have a chance to think about what I am doing, stop in my tracks, and put an end to this catastrophe.

Bike Two:

I point the Silver Missile down the gravel path.

As I begin the ludicrous first climb, my right leg immediately cramps on me but is then forced to release as it works through the range of the pedal stroke. So, with every rotation, some unknown muscle along the interior of my right thigh cramps, and just seconds later the knot pulls apart. I have, literally, a knife being driven into my leg every two seconds.

I lock my eyes onto the back of the cyclist in front of me, imagine a line connecting us, and follow her stroke for stroke up the hill and permit myself to think only about getting to the bridge that signals the top of this hill.

Somehow I do, and the moment I get to the top I stand out of my saddle and, while coasting downhill contort my body to try to stretch out the afflicted leg while avoiding the oncoming traffic.

This downhill, wheeled, high-risk yoga works, kind of.

Either that or the muscle gets so bored of cramping it decides to return to a semblance of docility, so we achieve détente. I enjoy a bite of the food bar from my hot dog tray, and begin a discussion with my legs that will last for miles. I promise to keep them properly hydrated and fed over the next 30 miles, and I in turn will allow them to put me in as much pain as they want.

However, they have to keep moving. This part is non-negotiable.

We're about 40 minutes in, and the worst of the course isn't even upon us, so I make sure that we all understand this agreement is binding even when things are going sideways.

With that, I begin to plod my way uphill, right into the maw of the course, and it will be another 45 minutes before I will actually begin to return to earth.

I see a 22 mile marker painted on the road, but I am wrecked.

I've made it through to the back half of the course, but the hills have taken their toll and even the rollers are devastating my legs. After all of the tricks I have played on myself, pushing myself for just one more mile, just one more bend, just to the next mailbox, my body has decided to call my bluff.

The carefully negotiated agreement I have crafted with my legs is in tatters, my calves leading a mutiny that was subsequently joined by my quads and, incredibly, several co-conspirators in my lower back.

Further, whereas ordinarily I would have difficulty recalling the features of a thirty mile bike course I have never seen before, I can see with perfect clarity in my mind every remaining foot of every remaining climb ahead of me, and I add them up, and I don't think I can make it.

I am low on fluids, the sun is beating down on me, the sweat on my shorts has evaporated to leave a latticework of salts covering my thighs, and as I drift down the back half of a roller I realize, blankly, that I don't know what to do with myself.

I'm not quitting, I think to myself, it's just that I can't keep going.

Isolated and on a quiet strip of asphalt with no one else around me, I feel completely and utterly alone and sad that this isn't going to work out the way I wanted it to.

While I have survived a shipwreck, it is though I am watching, in a detached way, as my hands slowly lose their grip on the rope that is keeping my head above the water.

At that very moment a ladybug lands on my left bicep, and is shortly joined by a second. They remind me of my girls, who love ladybugs and point them out whenever we see them hiking, and catch them in the park when they can to bring home to our plants.

I am suddenly jolted to alertness.

At once I remember that my girls are waiting for me. This is the first race I've ever done that the kids are attending, and they will meet me at the finish line.

If I don't get through this my girls will not see me finish.

To hell with that.

My girls are going to see their dad finish this thing.

I stand on the pedals resolving to myself that I will do whatever it takes to cross the line.

"Siiiiilver Miiiiisile" I am screaming, deliriously, at the top of my lungs, freaking out the roadside hikers as I descend the steeps with an abandon that did not characterize my first lap. I am in so much pain that I honestly don't care if I get hit by a car or fly off the side of a cliff. It would come as a relief.

In hospitals, there are beds and cold water.

And no hills.

With the last few miles between myself and the transition, I am seriously in trouble again.

A short, steep climb (a course volunteer has seen it fit to spray “OUCH” and “Is That All You Got, Fat Ass?” halfway up) consumed the last vapors of the gas in my tank, and I have nothing left but still face a painful two mile uphill to the trailhead.

I have fully exhausted my go-to tactic of loudly cursing Withrow in as many ways that I can think of in both English and French.

The turn onto the last hill is ahead, and I’m scrambling to figure out how I can make it, even preparing myself to walk.

I am so tired that I actually welcome the cramping in my legs, because the pain keeps my mind off of how depleted I am.

I play my one remaining card, and think of chasing Z-Man up and down the beach at Rockaway every Saturday morning before dawn for hours over the past few months. That guy is running multiple marathons through a 100 degree desert with 20 pounds on his back and his family ten thousand miles away. He’s not quitting.

I turn the cranks and my legs howl in torment and out loud I extemporaneously gasp “don’t tell me, tell it to Z-Man, bitches!” which, despite the shape I’m in, makes me laugh.

Every turn of the crank generates a cramp, and every cramp generates my auto response, and I labor up this Sisyphean hill, cracking myself up the entire way.

I say “tell it to Z-Man, bitches” a hundred times, maybe a thousand, and then suddenly at some point I am over the hill, face to face with a State Trooper and a race volunteer waving me into the park for the last run.

The volunteer yells “you look awesome!”

Involuntarily I yell “Tell it to Z-Man, bitches!” to the two men, and I can see the trooper’s eyebrows arch in surprise above the rims of his sunglasses.

Whoops.

Fatigue knows no mercy, but the Trooper does, and he simply says, “Enjoy the run”.

Run Three:

I am in the transition area, staggering off the bike and afraid to sit to put on my shoes as I doubt my ability to get back up. I perch on my cooler and lace up my road running shoes – at this point, I am doing anything I can to make it easier to lift my feet up. I force down a gel. I gulp some water.

All I have to do is run five miles through the woods, and I will be done with this underworld of pain and desperation. I stagger through the pavilion, grab a slice of watermelon, point at the bottle of whiskey and announce “I’m coming for you”, and force myself up the gravel path toward the trailhead.

Everything, of course, goes wrong. My legs, which had formerly reserved cramping horribly for the downhill sections, decide to pre-emptively cramp on the uphills. I need fluid and I promise them if they keep going I will drink as much as I can at the rest stop, which is somewhere up there.

I crash uphill, focused on one step at a time, and at one point I hear what sounds like a gigantic, wounded animal laboring for breath. I halt and look around. It takes a minute or so before I sheepishly realize I am listening to myself.

“Last lap” I cry out to the women at the rest station and pour water on my head and into my mouth.

“I’m glad to hear that dear” says one of them, eyeing me skeptically and silently laying even odds to herself that I won’t make it out of the woods alive.

I don’t have a plan any more, other than to make sure I move forward. If I fall, I will fall forward.

I am grabbing at saplings to try to divert any work I can away from my legs.

A long course runner floats past me, the balls of his feet tapping lightly against the leaves and packed gravel of the carriage road we are briefly sharing.

“You’re doing great!” he yells.

“STOP LYING TO ME” I yell at his back.

I am close.

I see the pavilion ahead, and there is a right turn that leads to maybe one mile of trail through the woods before I am done. As I work my way toward the turn, my leg cramps viciously. I skid and barely avoid falling, and I am stuck, staring at the pavilion and transition area literally a hundred feet ahead of me, but having to turn away from it if I want to finish.

I turn away.

I am out of the woods onto the last leg. As I turn onto the carriage road through the meadow, I see a large, oddly jet black stick lying across the entirety of the path, maybe 5 feet long. I mentally prepare myself to jump it, as I am so shot that there is every chance I’ll screw this up and trip over a three inch branch if I am not focused.

As I close on it, the stick coils back and stares at me.

It is the biggest black snake I have ever seen. A runner behind me yells “Jesus!” and I veer wildly around it.

As if the hills weren’t bad enough, there are now snakes to contend with.

I’m in the last meadow. I see the orange tape around the transition area. I see the pavilion, and I am almost delirious at the thought of finishing.

Then, my ladybugs see me.

The girls, exuberant, race through the meadow and join me on the trail with maybe a hundred yards left before the finish.

I can't believe how powerful it is to see them, running toward me with the insane abandon that little kids have when they're at full tilt. When they're upon me I catch their hands, and tell them we're going to finish together, and my four year old is moving so fast I have to beg her to slow down.

I see my wife, I hear Withrow yelling my name, and I am looking at the last four steps separating me from the finish line of this race. The crowd is cheering in a wholly genuine way, I am sure the sight of the girls running me in has struck a chord in all of them, and I collapse to the ground, overcome.

My forehead presses against the floor of the building, and I gasp. If there was any water left in my body, I would have wept uncontrollably.

I have finished.

