

New Jersey Devilman

Sunday, May 5

Results:

3:51:41

#90 overall, #11 age group

0.8 mile swim 28:02

40.3 mile bike 2:07:16 (183 avg watts)

8.8 mile run 1:09:24 (7:48 pace)

48 degrees and windy... really, really windy.



Race Day:

Be careful what you wish for, we are cautioned.

Last summer, I spent a not insignificant amount of time during the New York City IronMan fantasizing about cold weather. At multiple points during that horrible, horrible race, I would think fondly of Winnipeg in the winter. Given that nobody ever thinks fondly of Winnipeg, let alone in the winter, one can appreciate what kind of shape I was in (my collapse and subsequent stay in the medical tent simply confirming how badly heat affects me).

At 6:57 am on Sunday as I stepped out of my truck to compete in my first event of this season, the New Jersey Devilman, my skin erupted in goosebumps as a 45 degree wind burrowed its way into my flesh. I looked over at my passenger, the complete newbie Gareth, who himself was making numerous unprintable suggestions about the weather to God and a host of His disciples in response to the chill.

I glumly looked at the overcast sky, knowing full well that I had packed like a rookie and left every bit of warm clothing sitting at home. No jacket, no arm warmers, no gloves, no hat, no long sleeved jersey, not even my nose clips for swimming. Nothing.

The good news?

The good news was that I had inherited a hell of a cold from my five year old daughter earlier in the week, so I couldn't breathe through my nose, so I guess I really didn't need the nose clips.

Gareth and I had met at my building and loaded up the truck with our bikes in the relatively balmy conditions of Brooklyn roughly three hours prior at 4am. It was terrific to have the company, and as apprehensive as I was about heading into the season's debut event feeling like I had mud in my lungs it was a relief to be seated next to Gareth, a complete rookie, who had just learned how to swim over the winter and had never been in open water before.

He was, predictably, anxious about what the day had in store for him.

I did remind him that so far every person I have taken to their inaugural race has tried to drown themselves (Paco in '11, G-Money in '12, and now Gareth in '13). The good news about the Devilman swim, I explained, is that you actually can't drown if you wanted to. The water is four or five feet deep, and you're always about ten yards from the shore.

Gareth, munching on a toasted bagel I had prepared for our breakfast, pondered this in the darkness of the turnpike.

Somewhere on I-95 at about quarter after five my phone rings. It is Withrow.

"Look to your left" commands the disembodied voice, and I do, and there are JW and Jess, astride us in the passing lane.

We exchange pleasantries.

"Tell Gareth that I forgot to bring the wetsuit for him."

"I'm not going to do that – he's nervous enough as it is."

Gareth and JW chat for a few minutes, it is confirmed that JW actually has the wetsuit in question and it will be available for the swim, and as the conversation ends Gareth turns to me and says, "Seriously, mate, I'm convinced I've forgotten something critical back in my apartment."

We run through a checklist, and the one item I routinely forget, the bike helmet, Gareth has packed for sure as I even asked him about it before we left Brooklyn.

"You're fine".

There is definitely something to be said for showing up at an event on time, and for having learned the value of an organized transition area. For me, it was especially sweet to be racking a bike that for once wouldn't invite the incredulous stares and derisive commentary of my peers: yes, the Silver Missile has retired, and in her place now stood the gleaming Candycane Snowflake, a gorgeous two year old Cannondale Slice that my girls named based upon her red and white color scheme reminding them, immediately, of candycanes.

Withrow absolutely stole Candycane Snowflake at an eBay auction for me in the fall, and I had been over the moon with the ride quality of the bike since day one. While I miss the Missile for her sheer absurdity, the Slice was the reason I was really looking forward to today – with its carbon fiber frame and extremely balanced aero position, I was expecting a great ride on the relatively flat Devilman course.

I was almost helping me to ignore how incredibly cold it was in transition, and how unpleasant it was to have to strip out of my sweater to begin to struggle into my wetsuit.

I began to feel sorry for myself again when Gareth came loping past my area and announced "Robbie - I finally figured out what I forgot!"

"What?" I asked.

"My bike shoes."

Schadenfreude generates its own heat, and I felt a little better about my day.

This has come up, but it was cold. And windy.

We huddled in our wetsuits at the race start, looking out over the brown water of the watching the low, rumped grey clouds as they obscured the morning sun. All of us had our arms wrapped around our chests, hoping to keep what little warmth we had in our bodies.

As the sprint distance started, I noticed an unusual number of people being pulled from the water – first race jitters, combined with the temperature and the greyness of the morning was weighing on more than a few athletes. That said, I was convinced Gareth would be fine and Jess, John and myself kept telling him as much.

Further, there was no way the water was going to be colder than the air temperature. I couldn't wait to get in.

A couple guys standing next to me were debating whether to try to hit the toilets before the swim.

One turned to the other and said "Look, I'm freezing. Why don't you go ahead and do your business on me, kill two birds with one stone."

It was cold enough that I found myself simply nodding along in agreement. Good idea.

I am in the transition area, shivering in front of Candycane Snowflake, loathe to take off my wetsuit and expose my skin as the wind gusts through the bike racks. I look at the only piece of dry clothing I have available to me at this point: a farcically small pair of Injinji micro crew socks, with each little articulated toe pocket peeking out of my shoe tops and waving at me thanks to the breeze.

I try to put a positive spin on things as I tug the ultra fine material of the socks up over my wet feet, shivering while telling my toes that it is "time to get dressed, so enjoy wearing your little hats" as the guy beside me stares at me nervously as I talk to me feet.

Off toward the bike course, trying to pretend that moving at 20 miles per hour in a sopping wet tank top and race shorts will somehow not involve me freezing to death over the course of the next two hours.

If it is possible, I miss the gnats from last year. There are no bugs this year, of course, because they have all died from exposure.

The bike leg is my first race on Snowflake, and my first race attempting to ride to a specific power output.

Having recently equipped Snowflake with a power meter (another Withrow eBay theft) I have my target number in mind for the two hours, and am curious to see what it will be like to divorce myself from all the distractions I typically succumb to (*I want to pass that guy, I want to ride fast up that hill, I can't believe that woman just passed me, I want to coast down this hill, etc.*).

I push my way forward onto the course, fire up the head unit of my computer, and turn right into a very strong, gusting headwind. I soldier forward, but it is hard work. The wind is really something else, with the only possible benefit to it being that it took only a few moments to dry out my clothes (so now I am freezing cold and dry, as opposed to freezing cold and wet) and, as with any headwind, the promise that it will magically turn into a tailwind when I turn around.

Imagine, then, my dismay when I make the turn roughly ten miles into the course and discover that the wind has magically shifted 180 degrees to blow directly against me, again, for the next ten miles.

I try to stick to the number I had assigned myself, but it is a struggle, and I mentally adjust the number down ten watts halfway in.

Every now and then on a summer morning I'll go to the park with my girls and we'll watch the dogs run around during off-leash hours, running mad and frantic and seeking to make the most out of their temporary freedom. The girls love the big dogs the best – the mastiffs, the cane corsos, danes, nefoundlands, ridgebacks.

As a parent I fear the big dogs, not because they may hurt the girls, but because on those summer mornings the dogs' mouths are drool factories, gigantic wet caves with dozens of drool stalactites hanging from their ceilings, and long drool ropes beginning at the corners of their mouths and trailing behind them as the race toward the delighted girls for a "kiss".

It is mile 30 of the ride, and I realize I am one of those dogs.

The cold, my cold, the wind, the effort of pushing forward have combined and are weighing on me mightily and my sinuses decide to empty and my mouth, hanging open, is the only way for me to breathe. I can't (more correctly, won't) bring my hands up off the aero bars every two minutes to swipe at my face, and so multiple lengthy streams of drool anchor themselves at my mouth and trail crazily behind me. My nose is running like a faucet. My breathing is punctuated by deep rasps as the cold air tears at my chest. My hands are frozen to the ends of my bars, and I am generally avoiding having to shift gears because my fingers are so stiff it isn't clear to me I could even if I had to. I am outside and moving fast and in pain and my eyes hurt and my teeth throb and my back is in knots and I hate everyone.

I am so happy.

My toes are completely numb. They have been for miles. I think about this as I pedal toward the dismount line and wonder, in all seriousness, if this will impact my ability to run.

I unclip and clumsily trot toward the transition area and the *bête noir* of my triathlon skills (which is a specific lack of a skill on my part) suggests itself. As in, I have to pee, did for miles, but still can't quite make it happen on the bike. So I decamp to the transition area, rack Snowflake, pull off my shoes and massage my toes furiously (no feeling) and then give in to the demands of my body and race, in my socks with a running shoe in each hand (my fingers are too numb to work the laces) to the port-o-let.

In the warm, confined, calm of the toilet I feel oddly peaceful, and for the first time in hours, comfortable. I tuck my hands into my armpits to warm them, relieve myself, and pull my shoes on with my now-operative fingers. Nine miles stand between me, my sweater and a hot cup of coffee.

Here we go, I say to myself, and bolt out of the door back onto the course.

I am running, and trying to keep pace with a wisp of a girl who flies past me at the aid station while I am pouring water into my mouth. I am ignoring my watch and trying to relax into the pace the girl is keeping, which I can tell is quite quick, but as I adjust to the cadence required to match her speed I find I almost relax into it.

I run through an internal checklist I have compiled for myself during fast runs where I think about just about everything but my legs. I think about my shoulders, my arms and what angle they are bent at, how far back and how far forward they go with each stride, where the tips of my fingers are, I force my chest to open, my head to stay high, to look ahead, and if this is even possible, to allow any tension to fall away from me, run down my back, the backs of my legs, and leave it behind me in the road, an imprint, no longer attached to me.

The checklist works, better than it ever has, and I realize that the miles are falling away at what is for me a ludicrous speed – despite collecting a cup of water and a cup of sport drink at every station, I am turning in a series of 7:40 miles one after the other.

I see Withrow charging, looking as good as I have ever seen him on the run. For those in the know, this is a meaningful distinction – JW always looks *terrible* on the run, the very picture of agony, skin pale white and mouth wide open and gulping air. I shout “look at the size of that big white rabbit!” and we both move to the center of the road to high five, but the two of us are so intent on our form that we comically manage to miss.

Not long after I see Jess, yelp at her and in return she assures me she’s feeling good.

Finally, I see Gareth, his long legs engaged in a very athletic lope.

“You look unbelievably good in those tight shorts!” I shout as loudly as I can.

“Hey thanks so do you!”

With that, we swat at each other’s hands with a satisfying clap, and I head in for the last three miles.

To enforce my pace, I lock my eyes on a fellow down the road from me in a bright red kit and decide to pass him. He’s maybe a hair shorter than I am, his head is clean shaven, and his slightly stocky build suggests to me that at this point in the race he should be beginning to fade (because I certainly am).

So I speed up, but as I get to within about ten feet of him he picks his pace up. Assuming he’s heard my footsteps and upped his pace to an unsustainable level (for him), I match the increase and wait for him to fade.

And he doesn’t.

So, I decide to pick him off as the road starts to incline, and again, he matches the increase in my pace.

We continue this dance for the next three miles and it is killing me. I see a faded “44” inked onto his calf, and the indignation of being beaten by a guy who is older than me, a guy who has no hair, tortures me with every step. Thanks to my cold, my breaths are coming in loud, ugly rasps, and so every time I approach him he can hear me and somehow finds a way to incrementally speed up.

By this time we are headed into the school parking lot, maybe 300 yards from the finish, and the two of us are now in a serious race. My eyes narrow to slits, my mouth is wide open as I gulp for air, and I can’t believe this guy is going to best me. I regret every extraneous second I spent in the bathroom, in transition, walking through aid stations.

In pain and feeling my vision close in under the brim of my cap, I pull my hat off my head and ball it into my left hand, the fingers of my right hand splayed wide open.

I feel dizzy as we make our way toward the finish line, flying past other runners with me just off his right shoulder, and I have to concentrate on keeping my footing. I suspect I may throw up from the exertion, and my tongue feels too big in my mouth, so I stick it out as far as I can.

And he beats me, recording a 3:51:13 to my 3:51:14 and at that moment the photo of my finish captures, in perfect detail, my tongue lolling out of my mouth.

Again, nothing if not canine.

After the chute, I stagger over to him and his wife, spent, and congratulate him on a great race.

I head to the tent with food and water, lightheaded, and congratulate myself on a great race.

I find Withrow in the transition area, squaring away his kit and also preparing Jess' gear.

"Hey, how did you do?" he asks.

I flop onto the grass and, between fits of tubercular coughing, explain that I did great. In fact, I tell him, as soon as I can convince my body to stop feeling so nauseous, I am going to be giving myself a gigantic high five thanks to the strength of my run.

Through sheer bad luck, we manage to just miss Gareth finish.

His story, which I won't presume to tell in detail, is perfect: his swim was horrendous, and the life guards at one point spent five minutes trying to get him to stop hyperventilating so he could focus on actually swimming (keeping my personal track record for escorting rookies to horrible swims intact), his bike was a wreck thanks to the lack of shoes, and he jumped off the bike to discover that as much as his mind was ready to run, his legs weren't.

He was parched, starving, cold, hot, chafed, sunburned, soaking with sweat, miserable, and exhausted.

And so happy.

