

New York City Ironman: Race Report

2.4 mile swim (55:56)

122 mile bike (7:15 / 15.42 mph avg)

26.2 mile run (DNF)

Sunday, August 12

This is, by far, the hardest race report I've had to write because for the first time since getting mixed up in these events over a year ago I have to report that I did not finish.

My day ended just past the thirteenth mile of the marathon.

For several wretched, hilly miles prior I had been focused on just one thing: getting to the halfway point. There, I would be able to retrieve a bag I had previously prepared for myself, the contents of which (a dry pair of socks, a handful of cookies, and most importantly, two letters of encouragement my girls had prepared for me in secret the night before) were meant to push me through what I expected to be the most difficult point of the race.

I felt if I could just get to those letters, I would be able to push myself up and over the George Washington Bridge and see my family on the other side at the finish.

And so I could not believe it when, perhaps ten or fifteen yards away from the aid station with the bag, quite literally staring at the entryway to the tent, I came staggering to a halt and collapsed to the ground.

Two medics and a volunteer ran to me as I pushed upward first to my knees, then to my feet, in an effort to demonstrate to both them and myself that I was fine.

I was not fine. I could not hold myself upright, and so sank back to the ground back into a crouch. My head hung low from my shoulders, my palms flat on the ground, and water from the ice that was melting inside my hat dripped steadily from the brim between my knees and pooled on the ground.

I screwed my eyes shut and then opened them wide in an attempt to clear them. I looked up again at the tent, and a little higher at the west pillar of the George Washington Bridge, plainly visible and towering over the trees. I stared down at my legs, folded upon themselves and listless, and tried to shake off the dizziness and fog that crept into and infected my mind.

I spent the next twenty minutes refusing to let the medics take me off the course, trying to explain to them that if I could just get to the letters from my girls I was certain I would be fine.

That I would finish this race.

The senior most of the two was trying to explain to me that despite all the fluids I had been drinking my body was for some reason not properly absorbing them, that I was dangerously dehydrated, and I was overheating.

"Robbie, you listen to me. You get onto that bridge and you're not going to make it off".

I finally rose, unsteadily, to face the bridge.

My vision blurred, almost folding into itself, and to stop from pitching forward, I grabbed the medic's shoulder.

He was right. I turned to face him, to tell him that I understood that it was over for me today, to take me off the course.

I opened my mouth to say the words and I couldn't speak.

Having spent so long focused on crossing the finish line, having spent over a year forcing my body to comply with my increasingly absurd demands, my mind simply would not give me permission to say the words “I’m done”.

The medic and I stared at each other for a long minute, me dizzy, still holding his shoulder, my heart beating erratically and shallow breaths rasping out of my open mouth, and could not get myself to say the words.

I closed my mouth again. I whispered, “I can’t say it” to him.

He looked at me for a second and said “I know buddy. You guys are all crazy sons of bitches. You think it’s hard to get to the finish? Sometimes it’s harder to stop when you should. You got a wife? Kids?”

“Yes. Over there.” I nodded at Manhattan.

“Let’s get you fixed up and back to them in one piece. That’s the best thing you can do right now. Keep hold of my shoulder and just follow me.”

Wordlessly, I followed him toward the medical tent, and every half step forward heaped an indescribable and acute torment upon me. I took one last look at the bridge. I did not finish.

I had been lying on a cot in a medical tent for half an hour. A remarkably sympathetic nurse paired off with me the moment I was dropped off by the medical team, and within moments had me hooked up to an IV.

My body devoured two bags of saline in twenty minutes.

For some reason, even though I had paid very careful attention to both food and hydration because of the incapacitating heat (salt tablets every 45 minutes for the entire day, alternating sports drinks and water, probably drinking roughly two liters of fluids every hour) at some point my body stopped properly absorbing the water and delivering it to my muscles.

A blood sample confirmed this – the nurse took my blood and noted that my electrolyte levels were actually fine, I just didn’t have nearly enough water in it.

I sat on my cot and stared glumly down at my body. The damn thing got me 128 miles and then decided to malfunction.

“Hey – can I ask you a favor?”

“Sure” the nurse said.

“Can you get my special needs bag from the aid station over there? It’s got a dry pair of socks in it, but also some letters my girls wrote to me.”

The nurse returned with my bag and I pulled out the socks, the fig newtons, and what I had really wanted – the letters.

Leonie had written, by herself, a card that repeated “Go Dad!” about fifty times, complete with a picture of me running on it.

It was Sylvie’s card that cleaved me in two: she had drawn an elaborate picture of a ladybug for me, and Val had helped her write “Dad if you get tired just imagine you are flying home on my ladybug wings”.

It is a reference to a story I have been telling them at bedtime, a true story about how two ladybugs landed on my arm at a point when I was exhausted and about to quit the American Zofingen race in the Catskills, but I saw the bugs and thought of the girls and pulled myself together and made it through to the finish. They love it.

The nurse watched me read the cards.

When I opened Sylvie's and read it, I clapped my hand to my mouth, I wept, and the tears splashed onto the ladybug picture, making the colors blur.

When I finally pulled myself together, I wiped my eyes and looked back up at the nurse.

"I guess I'm rehydrated".

Minutes after the second bag of saline had been delivered into my body, I felt strikingly better. In fact, I argued with the doctors, I was well enough to continue.

The doctors convened, and while they thought it was a ridiculous idea and made me promise I would just walk the last ten miles, they agreed to let me go on. They found a race official and let him know I wanted to keep going – the question was, while I did get medical attention, since it had not resulted in forward progress, could I continue?

The official determined, however, that because I had left the course, I could not re-enter it.

The medical tent was ten yards off the run course, just beside the transition area. Beside myself, I argued the point but the race official was adamant.

At that point, he took my chip.

I did not finish.

So, let me tell you about 91% of an Ironman.

The swim was dramatic for potentially obvious reasons – with news reports on Thursday that a sewage plant in Westchester was busy releasing waste into the Hudson, it was unclear whether or not there would be a swim in the first place.

I think everyone I knew emailed me links to the story about the condition of the river, with the requisite joke about the relative sanity of swimming in the Hudson.

My instinct was that given the sheer size of the river and the volume of water moving through it, absent some kind of massive spill, there would be adequate dilution and we'd find ourselves jumping off a barge into the river on Saturday morning.

By four in the afternoon Friday that the swim would take place was confirmed by the race director, to the relief of me and many of the competitors – I think most of us would have felt slighted if the swim had been cancelled.

I had very little time Friday to fret about the swim, because the logistics of getting all of my gear organized and to the transition area in New Jersey, coupled with thunderstorms severe enough to prompt weather advisories for the city, consumed my entire day.

I decided to throw my gear in a backpack and pedal over to the Manhattan ferry port just before noon, as it would be a last check for the bike, a chance to turn my legs over, and it simply made more sense than battling traffic into and out of the city on a Friday.

It was ominously cloudy and humid, and the moment I turned my bike down Flatbush Avenue, it started to pour - sheets and sheets of rain, driven sideways by gusts of wind, soaking me to the bone and driving me sideways into traffic as I gingerly navigated down Canal street, dodging potholes and cracks in the pavement that would shame roads in Beirut.

I pulled in to the 39th street ferry terminal and was relieved to simply get out of the rain. The terminal was sparsely populated, and I dropped onto a bench to wait for the next departure. As I took in my surroundings, I realized there was a unicorn right in front of me – a flawless Cervelo P5.

I looked up to identify the owner, and I realized I was staring at pro athlete Sarah Piampiano, whose brother I know via the mechanics of a “friend of a friend” connection, and spent a week snowboarding with in Utah years ago.

How do you strike up a conversation with a pro triathlete?

“Hey, Sarah – we’ve never met, but I happen to know your brother. You’re doing great this year. Have a great race tomorrow. Nice bike!”

She thanked me for the well-wishes, and moved off to join a group of maniacally fit-looking young men.

She would go on to finish 4th.

Race day started early, though slightly differently for me than most others.

I invited myself to join JP in his truck to the start, despite having been warned by the race director the night before that there was no way you could get to the race in a car. Being natives, we figured we’d risk it, maybe bribe some cops, and in a worst case scenario walk down to Ross Dock from the bridge.

Coming out of my door at 4am to meet him while cradling a large cup of coffee, I discovered the girls had covered the sidewalk with a giant chalk drawing that read “Go Bananas IronDad” and laid a dozen bananas out on the stoop. I gathered the fruit, and walked to the corner of my block to wait for JP to show up.

Blocked by an efficient set of barricades at the foot of the bridge, we jumped from the truck and started walking downhill toward Ross Dock in the dark.

It was already, at 5:00 am, incredibly hot and humid.

Sweat pooled and ran in an ominous river down my back.

Throngs of people were navigated, bodies were marked, wetsuits went on, bags were dropped off, tires inflated, friends and teammates located, and ultimately, the long line to the ferry was joined.

It was a relief to finally get to the upper platform of the ferry and start moving northward on the Hudson to the barge that would serve as our entry point. We were on the last ferry, largely by choice, assuming that it couldn't possibly hurt to have the current push us along on the swim.

The swim start was a unique and, for me, a completely enjoyable experience – I mean, really, how many millions of people live in the city but will never, ever, go for a dip in the Hudson? Further, jumping off a barge into the Hudson and sighting against the George Washington Bridge?

The water was opaque but very warm, and quite saline as the tide had pushed volumes of ocean water upriver for hours prior to the swim.

I swam to plan – slowly, with decent form, a breath every three strokes and making sure to sight off the buoys to avoid adding distance due to inefficiency. Midway through the swim, I took a few strokes and suddenly felt like I had stepped on a conveyor belt.

The current was so strong I couldn't believe it, and this was confirmed when I was pulled out of the water by two strong volunteers at the finish in 55 minutes, a full half hour faster than target.

I was then stripped of my wetsuit with enthusiasm and efficiency by a separate set of volunteers, located the bag with my bike gear, and made my way into to change tent to ready myself for the next leg.

Coming out of the water less than an hour thanks to the Hudson's extraordinary current, I felt cautiously optimistic about the bike – the one piece of the puzzle I was without question the most concerned about.

I had focused on getting some longer rides in leading up to the race, and spent time riding with better cyclists to force the issue (any cyclist, really, is a better cyclist than I am).

I reminded myself that I had done a lot of very good training in the past few months, got my helmet on, located my sunglasses and shoes, and charged out of the tent to find two women manning giant foil pans of sunscreen.

I treated them to a gunshow, announcing "I know you've been waiting all morning for the chance to do this, ladies, and here it is... be thorough". Minutes later I was dripping with sunblock and trotting to retrieve the Silver Missile, the old girl waiting patiently for me whilst surrounded by velocipedes crafted from far more exotic elements.

In fact, as I was racking the Missile the day prior in JP's company, he delivered the most inadvertent rebuke I have to date received about my bike.

After taking her in for a few minutes, pausing to mumble observations to himself ("wow, a third ring up front... been a while since I have seen one of those") he turned to me and said "Robbie, you know that you can get a really good bike on eBay these days for, like, \$400?"

Now, I know that there is no such thing as an easy Ironman, and the corollary is that there is no such thing as an easy bike leg, and I say this as a man whose experience in biking has been tempered by the hammer and anvil of the American Zofingen.

But the bike leg here was brutal. I put the Missile in her lowest gear and worked my way out of transition, up the climb out of Ross Dock and onto the Palisades.

At that point, according to a volunteer, it was already 80 degrees and over 80% humidity, and despite a light froth of grey cloud to keep the sun at bay, I felt like I was breathing through a hot, damp towel less than three minutes into a seven hour bike leg.

I slowly worked up that hill and watched as dozens of people passed me, and even watched a few folks stand up on the pedals (“*you’re joking*” I said to nobody in particular) which only cemented my resolve to go slow.

And I did.

The bike was long and awful, and the weather somehow always found a way to get worse. A light rain looked like it might cool us off, but it was incredibly brief and by noon, the sun had burned away the cloud cover and, combined with the high humidity, rendered an effective temperature of 90 degrees for the next four hours.

With no drafting (and thus, no chance to chat with other athletes) and no practical way for spectators to get onto the course, it was a long, lonely ride, and there was precious little cover at any point to escape the sun.

Further, while in my mind I had visualized it as a somewhat benign, rolling course thanks to years of lazy road trips up and down the parkway, with the humidity and the unimpeded sun bearing directly down on me the Palisades turned out to be a daunting and vicious serpent when you’re out there on a bike for over seven hours.

To perhaps accent my misery, an unrelenting headwind presented itself for the last 25 miles.

There were a lot of bike accidents, serious accidents, and after my first extended downhill, that didn’t surprise me.

The length of the hills meant speeds well in excess of 40 miles per hour, and as folks bunched up on the narrow course you had a lot of people frozen on their aero bars, anxious about changing position to get to their brakes, getting more and more nervous with every twitch and shake in the headset, and substantial disparities in speed as the fast guys and lunatics rode the big rings.

And then, someone would make a mistake, get nervous, shudder, blink, edge too close to another rider, or more spectacularly, as I witnessed on a hill roughly 20 miles on the out, move too close to the center of the road and have their tires grabbed by the space between the cement pavers.

I saw a lot of ambulances.

It hurt, but I stayed on plan.

I drank and ate at every aid station. I took a salt capsule every 45 minutes. I sang songs to people as I passed them, or, more frequently, as they passed me (folks seemed to get a kick out of *The Girl from Ipanema*, and just about anything from the Cole Porter songbook was well-recieved). I rode slowly up hills. I moderated my efforts on the flats.

I was hydrated enough that, after mile 30, I had to dismount at every single aid station thereafter to duck into the men’s. I probably could have knocked a solid half an hour off my bike time had I ever unraveled the mystery of on-bike fluid evacuation.

But for me there were no flat tires, no missed shifts, no nerve-wracking wobbles at speed, and after some eternity the Missile delivered me safely back to the transition area.

As I threaded my way back down toward Ross Dock runners had already completed the front half of the marathon and I saw that scores of people were walking, zombie-like, up the hill toward the bridge.

Looking back, I don't know that I properly internalized how depleted those people looked – and these are the athletes that completed their bike splits in five hours, so I was looking at pros, Australians, and all the irritating people who ran in varsity track in college.

It had been the equivalent of 90 degrees for four hours, and I had a marathon to look forward to.

I was almost giddy at the prospect of getting off my bike. As I handed the Missile to a volunteer, I told him he could throw it in the Hudson.

I got into the run tent and immediately drank a bottle of water. Just being out of the sun was magical. I laced up my shoes, covered myself with a fresh layer of sunscreen, pulled my hat low over my head and made my way back out of transition.

I slowly bounced on the balls of my feet to test my muscles – once again, the relief of no longer being clipped onto a bike and being able to unwind my body had me looking forward to the run.

I jogged, slowly, up the hill out of Ross Dock for what should have been the last time.

Halfway up the hill I happened upon Dr. Angela marching forward. I pulled alongside up and asked how she was feeling, and she confided to me that the bike has wounded her. Her exact description of the bike course was “demoralizing”, which perfectly captured its incrementally ever-increasing leaden misery.

I could feel my legs beginning to tighten as I walked with her, and I decided it was best to keep them moving, so I wished her well, said goodbye and jogged ahead.

The next team member I came across was Jen from Houston, whom I had never previously met. We chatted amiably and jogged with each other for the next three or four miles, and both caught up with Jess, who was gamely nursing her injured foot.

I delivered high fives to several folks who were working back from the turnaround, and while the Palisade hills were as awful as I remembered, I was in good spirits and I felt strong, especially as my biking muscles relaxed and realized workload would now be shared by my running muscles.

Every time I paused to walk, I felt the muscles in my legs twitch, and fearful of cramping I made the executive decision to keep running regardless of the terrain.

I did make a point of walking through every aid station, taking on water and food and dumping ice into my cap so that it could melt directly onto my head.

I crossed paths with a host of team members, but the most memorable were Withrow and JP, whom I had last seen on the bike course well ahead of me.

Withrow was punishing himself, his mouth locked open to gulp in air, and he simply turned his eyes onto me and threw out a fist in recognition as we passed. There was nothing extrinsic or wasteful in his actions, and his eyes immediately returned to the course as he pushed himself through to the back half and on to the task at hand.

When JP ran past me I was ironically struck with the thought that he might not finish the race. Genial by disposition, with an expression that defaults to a playful grin, JP's face was contorted into a mask of pain, his skin was pallid, and he was working so hard that the striations in his muscles seemed animated as though by a comic book artist depicting a superhero in flight.

He was moving at pace, straight up a hill, the effort of it looked to be killing him, and I just couldn't believe he'd be able to keep it up.

I continued to press forward.

Ten miles in, I pass Z and KO – they're speed walking, and I yell at them to prepare for me to catch them after the next turn around. Z chides me, "look, we can only walk so slowly, mate, pick it up". I am frankly looking forward to their company, and expect to pull alongside them by the halfway point, and plan stay with them up the hill to the bridge entrance.

I make the turn, my time in the Palisades at this point will only get shorter, and at about 11 miles my stomach reacts poorly to the water and sport drink I take in, and I am momentarily dizzy as I walk out of the aid station, stumbling sideways into a table as I put on my cap.

Odd.

Mile twelve is difficult. Every now and then I see a flash, and look to see who is taking pictures.

There is nobody taking pictures.

Dr. Angela pulls alongside me - she has found her legs, and asks me how I am doing. For the first time, I realize the answer to this question is "not so good".

I tell her to go on ahead as we crest an incline and she pulls away as I slow to a walk and I begin taking a mental inventory to determine what is wrong with me here, away from fatigue. I am tired, but not exhausted. My heart rate is not high. I am, however, feeling waves of nausea come over me that are amplified by blurred vision and dizziness.

This is a problem, because I can't keep myself balanced enough to run, so am forced to walk.

I look straight ahead and I tell myself that I am short minutes away from the next aid station, and I keep moving.

I play a scene in my mind over and over again where I get to the tent with my bag, and I open it up and I get the letters from my girls and they energize me and I tuck them into my jersey and head up over the bridge, and into the city.

And I take another step.

I am in trouble. I crest the top of yet one more miserable hill and I see, ahead, the special needs tent with the west pillar of the bridge towering above it. I stop briefly to take it in, but instead of the sense of relief I have been expecting I greet the scene with, if anything, a jolt of panic.

I am faint, not from fatigue, but from some unidentifiable thing that has my vision fog and my stomach continue to curdle.

And I am having difficulty balancing.

I focus directly on the special needs tent, perhaps fifteen or twenty yards away at this point, and take a step toward it.

My sense of hearing disappears, and I have to put my hands out to my side to keep balance, as though I am on a beam or a tightrope.

I tell myself to go get the letters from my girls.

They are right there. Right there in front of me.

I will have them in my hands if I just keep going forward.

It is at this point that I take my last forward step of the race.

It is dark. I'm wrapped in a blanket and sitting on the port side of the ferry that is shuttling back and forth from Ross Dock to the finish line in Manhattan. Beside me is Bill, a course volunteer who earlier saw just how devastated I am by this outcome, and who decided to personally escort me back to the city and help me find Val and the girls.

He suggested this side of the boat because the view of the city is much better, and he's right.

We chat about the race, comparing notes, and he's careful to let the conversation lapse from time to time so I can process what has happened to me. I am incredibly grateful for his company.

We get off the ferry, and he lends me his phone so I can tell Val to come meet me at the 79th street circle.

Standing at the traffic circle, I see the truck enter the roundabout.

Bill takes a step back and I stand there, dejectedly, with the wind picking at the edges of the blanket.

The doors fly open and out jumps Val, our good friend Patricia, and the girls.

In banana costumes.

The girls throw themselves at me, over the moon to see me, and show me all the posters they had made for me. Leonie leaps into my arms from the bed of the truck and tells me that she's happy to see me.

Sylvie announces that she is so very happy to see me, but doesn't know why I didn't finish in the same place as the others.

Val, who knows the profundity of my disappointment, offers an embrace.

"I didn't finish" I whisper into her hair.

We are interrupted by Sylvie, who is pulling at my blanket to get my attention.

She is pressing a carton of chocolate milk into my hand, which she insisted Val buy, because she knows I like to drink it after I exercise.

I am so happy to see my family I can't believe it.

Val herds me into the truck.

It is time to go home.

Driving back to Brooklyn through the city, I tell the girls my story: that I got hurt, and fell down, and I was so thirsty that I had to get two needles in my arm so that the doctors could put water into my blood.

Thanks to a recent vaccination, if there is one thing that resonates with the girls and conveys a combination of urgency and horror, it is getting needles.

But *two* needles? They can't believe it.

They make me show them the marks in my arm, and tell them again how I fell down right in the road.

I begin to relate how I got the letters they wrote for me, and I choke midsentence.

I find myself apologizing to them for not finishing.

I woke up at four in the morning on Sunday and could not get back to sleep.

Sylvie was splayed out on my chest, fast asleep herself, so I pried her off of me and rolled out of bed on legs that felt, on balance, pretty good given everything that had happened to them. I walked downstairs and spooned some coffee into the espresso pot and set it on the stove to heat. I flopped onto the sofa, staring out the windows at the Empire State Building and waiting for dawn.

What I couldn't shake is how let down I felt.

Ironman is a sport defined by its biplicity, because on the face of it, it is the very essence of solitude – you train by yourself, and you race by yourself. You suffer, for extended periods of time, repeatedly bumping into your physical limits, and you do all this suffering in complete isolation.

And yet the only way that doing this sport is at all possible, for me at least, is because of all of the people I take with me each time I step out the door.

I am with my friends, my teammates, my family, my girls. My wife.

They all make this possible for me, lending support in a hundred different ways to allow me to compete.

So, to not have been able to finish this race brings an unusually heavy burden with it.

So many people contributed so significantly to my effort and put me in a position to start on race day, and in turn the sense of obligation I felt to repay this debt by finishing the race was much greater than I could have possibly anticipated.

In fact, had I finished the race I don't know that I would have appreciated the depth of this unspoken commitment.

Sitting there, alone, on Sunday morning, waiting for the coffee and staring out the window at the city, I wondered at the nature of this debt of mine, and what it means to not have satisfied it by crossing the finish line.

Lost in thought, I looked down to see that I was slowly turning my wedding band on my finger - the ring that I took off the night before the race and gave to Val, promising to get it back at the finish.

I had no idea how it got back on my finger, and certainly with the tumult that marked the end of my day I did not think to ask for it before I crawled into bed.

While I was sleeping, Val must have held my hand and put the ring back.

I stared at the ring for a while.

A measure of comfort crept into me – perhaps finishing isn't the biggest part of the compact after all.

The obligation isn't to a specific outcome.

The obligation is to honor everyone who has supported me in this pursuit with my absolute best effort.

Am I comfortable that I did my best? I am.

I poured some coffee for myself and returned to the window to watch the sun push back against the night and bring the city into a new day.

Another sunrise for me, and I got my ring back too.

Not a bad day after all.