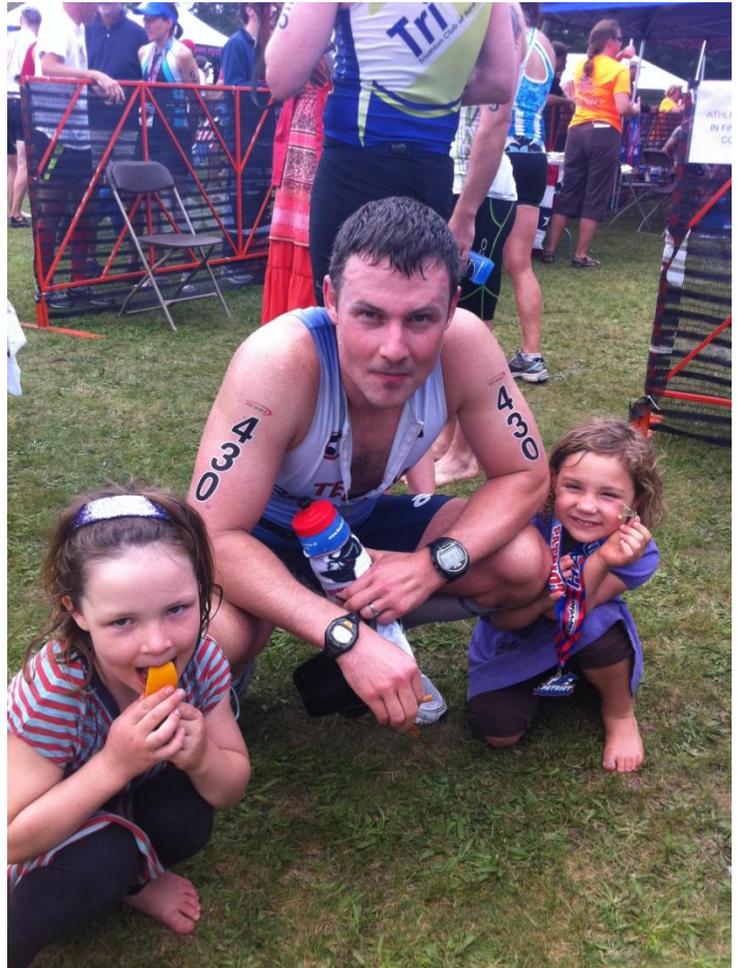


Patriot Half

Saturday, June 16

5:39 finish	215 of 596 overall
1.2 mile swim	(45 minutes – 2:08 pace)
56 mile bike	(2:59 – 18.67 mph avg)
13.1 mile run	(1:48 – 8.15 pace)



Friday, June 15:

Following a fully anticipated but still beyond maddening series of delays on I-95 (the mother of all sclerotic traffic arteries) Valerie, the girls, and myself are within spitting distance of Cathedral Camp, where we will register for tomorrow's race, set the kids loose, and locate and feed KO with a picnic supper that we had promised him.

At this very moment, however, I'm on the shoulder of Route 140 with my blinkers on while both girls simultaneously indulge themselves in a dramatic road pee, unable to wait the final ten minutes to our destination.

Within moments, a State Trooper pulls up behind us. I wave and walk toward his window trying to imagine what the fine is for peeing on the side of the highway in Massachusetts.

"Emergency, huh?" he asks.

"They're four and six. We've been on the road for five hours now. If you'd like, you can go ahead and put them in jail for the night. My wife and I would probably sleep better."

"Keep 'em" he says.

We locate both KO and race registration, and the venue looks very promising – a huge transition area, an encouragingly glassy lake filled with cool, clear water, and rolling, shaded backroads with elevation changes but nothing that remotely looks like a devastating climb.

We unpacked the dinner Val made, a fantastic whole wheat pappardelle with pesto and studded with olives, kale and artichoke hearts.

Having volunteered to feed KO, Val and I had some initial concerns about whether he would enjoy the meal (given that one's pre-race dinner is a big deal) but, watching him work on his third helping, we grew comfortable that any concerns were misplaced.

The girls ran around like lunatics, dipping their toes in the lake, chasing butterflies, testing the swings at the playground, and darting past our picnic table from time to time like hummingbirds, sampling bites of food.

With dinner behind us and the sun working its way beyond the horizon, we made our way to the fabulous Comfort Inn nearby and plan to meet each other at 5:45 in the morning so we have plenty of time to ready ourselves.

While emptying the truck of the cacophony of equipment required to compete in a race with two young girls in tow (compression sleeves, bike tools, a complete set of My Pretty Ponies including Baby Rarity and AppleJack, LuLu the Doll, bike helmet, Maximus the White Horse, DVDs of Shreks one through three, Madagascar, and Happy Feet, wetsuit.. the list goes on) I bump into Dr. Angela checking in, herself reeling from the traffic on I-95.

I tell her to meet me and KO in the lobby at 5:45 am since we know exactly where we are going so she can get herself efficiently registered and ready to race in the morning.

Sage readers might just recognize this as ironic foreshadowing.

Saturday, June 16:

It's 6:00 am and Kevin and I are crossing a bridge into Taunton, ten miles north and 180 degrees in the wrong direction of where we're supposed to be.

Dr. Angela is dutifully following us, but at this point, she is no doubt aware that we've led her monumentally astray.

Several potentially illegal turns later, we finally arrive at the race and park in a hurry, directing Angela to registration and ourselves struggling to apply sunscreen, inflate tires, grab all our gear and race to set up in transition.

I try to joke about this ironic situation with myself as I frantically claw my way into my wetsuit, given that this is the first event where I have actually checked in the night prior, got as much sleep as possible, ate a lazy breakfast and was within a few miles of the start line.

A side note here that Withrow, having mercilessly chided me for weeks about what a yardsale my transitions are (including the creation of an actual powerpoint presentation that prominently features me as the "how not to do this properly" contra-example for beginning triathletes) has actually helped me.

In response to his multiple derisions, for the first time I have meticulously planned my transition area and erred dramatically on the side of minimalism. It consequently takes me virtually no time to set up. I literally can't believe it.

Subsequently, during the race, my actual transitions are effortless and last a minute or two, instead of the time measurable in seasons that they normally do.

I refuse to let him know this of course, as I hate the idea of him being able to congratulate himself for my improvement.

I'm penned up and waiting to start my first Half, and I am greeting the day with an odd sense of equanimity. No doubt this calm is a function of some combination of having survived the Zoff, my training, and the absurd distances that await me in August for the full Ironman. Six hours of running around in the countryside while other people hand me water and cookies? Fantastic.

After the elite athletes, the women are off first, and the gaggle of them churns into the lake.

Five minutes after they're off, a lone woman in her red cap forces her way through the crowd leaps over the barriers separating the crowd from the beach, pulls her goggles on, and gamely soldiers into the water to start her race late.

I think I recognize the face, and I guiltily realize Dr. Angela's day has begun.

Old guys like me are the third heat, and I am relaxed, if not outright looking forward to the swim. Extrapolating the time it took me to complete the Devilman swim forward I figure it should take me 45 minutes to do the 1.2 miles at my gentleman's pace.

And, exactly 45 minutes later, I get out of the water.

I smile to myself as I record the split on my watch. I trot to my transition space and see everything laid out neatly, a stunning level of order for me. It's calming. My transition is fast and smooth, and in no time I am on the bike course, enjoying myself, popping a salt capsule into my mouth and trying to decide who to shamelessly follow in the absence of a power meter.

Though his calves look dangerously muscular, I decide on bib 414, put my imaginary thirty foot long lasso around him and drop onto my aero bars, hands resting comfortably on the new teal blue tape that mummifies them.

The ride continues to be the weak link in the Robbie chain, so I dip into my bento box, nibble on an energy bar, and breathe deeply.

Let's go, 414. Take me in.

What is it with these Australians and their irritating levels of fitness?

ReserveAid Team member Steve Darke rockets past me, as chatty as a schoolgirl at the same time, so I get one gigantic, accented sentence poured into my left ear that increases in volume as he passes me, only to fade as he pulls away, *"HowyougoingmateLOOKINGSTRONGHAVEAGOODRACEcheersmate..."*

Five minutes later, I pass him at the side of the road as he's flatted. I call out to see if he needs help, he refuses and waves me on.

Down the road I am working up sympathy for him and his situation, concerned that this could put him off his pace if not his whole race, when the bastard rockets past me again.

I can tell because in my left ear I hear “HeyrobbiemateHOWYOUGOINGLOOKINGSTRONGlookinggreat!” before he streaks past, completely out of sight within minutes.

“I just love me some orange tape!”

It is Withrow, passing me on the left, stongly. It is going to be a long time before I see him again.

Following 414 is working, and a decent little game of cat and mouse ensues. I clearly weigh more, because I routinely pick him off at the bottom of any declines, but he’s very smooth and his pace pushes me a little on the uphills. Still, the invisible elastic cord that connects us is reliably expanding and contracting from ten yards to thirty yards and back again.

I am drinking a lot, taking salt tabs (one every 45 minutes all race long, no cramping, absolutely brilliant), and getting calories in via a mix of gu and food bars.

My legs are tired but working. If anything, I am unnerved by how good I feel.

Roughly 20 miles in, I realize I have to pee.

In fact, I must pee.

But I can’t pee.

For ten miles, I try every trick in the book, and I honestly cannot pee on the bike. Finally, in a blind rage, I pull off the course at the top of a longish gradual uphill grade and leap into the bushes.

Emerging, I check back down the road to gauge traffic before I rejoin the hunt for 414 and feel the fear Ahab himself, for I witness nothing less than a gigantic white orgy of muscle and rage and speed closing directly upon me with potentially deadly consequences.

It is KO, attired head to toe in a suit of white cooling technical gear, riding at an astonishing pace and overtaking a knot of slower riders. He spots me, no doubt concerned that I am experiencing some kind of mechanical issue, and screams “Hey Robbie are you OK?” which, because I don’t want him to stop on my account, forces me to scream “KEEP GOING I JUST REALLY HAD TO PEE” at the top of my lungs for the benefit of a good twenty people.

I remount, traumatized.

Roughly 40 miles in now, and the ride is starting to hurt. I’ve got wind in my lungs and energy, my heart rate is under control, but my body is starting to protest the contortions demanded by the aero bars. It’s a creeping, incremental ache that is insidious – it certainly doesn’t count as outright pain, but I can’t quite banish it and it gnaws at me.

I realize the Ironman is going to be a long ride.

The most memorable pass involves, as most of them do, someone passing me. There is the sound, first, which seems endemic to those bikes mounted with rear disc wheels, an unnerving mechanical sound that combines a whirring and

ticking of an almost horological precision, accompanied by the growl of a dense fabric being torn in half, as though the very air around me is being cleaved in two.

And then he's past me, leaving me with a view of two thighs so cartoonish in their size and overdevelopment they look like afterthoughts, or some kind of slab prostheses, precariously balanced on top of a mortal man's legs.

I stare in astonishment, but not for long – he's gone so fast he rises and dips out of view at the crest of a long incline.

Later, when talking about the race with Val, I will recall getting passed by these thighs to her, and she stops me in my tracks, knowing exactly who I am talking about, supplying a level of detail facilitated by his abbreviated race trunks that suggest other parts of this same body are also unexpectedly large.

With roughly 5 miles to go on the bike my body decides to redouble its efforts to broadcast discomfort.

I am not exhausted, but my back is sore, my neck is sore, and my legs and joints begin to carp and grouse like irritable children learning they still have another hour in the car to go before they're home.

To silence the kvetching, I reach down to treat myself to a swig of heed. It is my last bottle of fluid, as I felt clever enough about my race to not want to lug the extra weight around and so declined any additional fluids at the last aid stop. As I raise the bottle to my lips I fumble for a brief moment, and watch in horror as the bottle tumbles between my bars and crashes to the ground.

I am probably 100 yards out from finishing the bike leg. I am not feeling as sharp as I would like, but I surprise myself when I happen to look up and spot Val and the girls coming out of the parking lot. It's a shot in the arm, seeing them there and at this point in the race.

I call out and catch their attention, and the girls are screaming "*Allez, Silver Missile, Allez*", an encouragement Val has taught them, but which did not stop Sylvie, my four year old, from developing her own cheer for the other participants, which was "*Allez, Go, Beat The Others, BUT NOT MY DAD!*"

Energized, I head toward the dismount.

The faster I run, the faster I will see them.

My transition is once again fluid and undramatic. Undamn you, Withrow.

Val and the girls have moved toward the transition exit and I see them on the way out, they're cheering, my feet feel like they're on springs given the contrast between my bike shoes and the plush soles of my new Asics.

"I will see you guys in two hours" I yell, hoping in earnest that I am telling them the truth.

Goal: no more kamikaze seven minute first miles.

I am trying to run a nine minute or slower first mile, relaxing my legs and focusing on reasonable form. I do this while with a group of guys beginning the run course, and start chatting with the guy next to me who looks both very young and very fit.

“How you doing so far?” I ask brightly.

“Ah, not great – having a stomach issue, so kind of trying not to puke right now. I wouldn’t run too close.”

Not clear what the response should be, so I encourage him to have a great race and allow myself to pick up the tempo into mile two.

I establish a very good rhythm on the run. At each aid station, walk for a handful of steps while I drink Heed, dump a cup of water on my head, and get moving again so I don’t lose any momentum. I can feel my legs unwinding from the ride, and the more they relax, the faster I get until I am ticking off 8:15 miles.

The sun is bearing down but the temperature is still somewhat moderate – still, it is a relief when the tree canopy closes over the roadside to provide a measure of dappled shade.

Four, maybe five miles in, I am once again Ahab. KO is up ahead, all white and towering over the other runners, momentarily hobbled by his knee but gamely forcing his way forward.

As I close on him, I recall Melville: *I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it...*

I ask him how he’s doing as we head into the next aid station, and he shakes his head angrily as he swings his leg forward and points to his knee. He crushed the bike course, but is having difficulty getting his knee to behave for the run. I offer to run with him for a while and he shakes me off, announcing he’ll be fine.

I dump a glass of water over my head and get going.

I’m now averaging 8:30 miles and feeling strong. Miles seven, eight, and nine come and go without much drama – at one point, I excoriate a group of girls who are watching the race for not making enough noise with a pile of cowbells.

“COME ON LADIES... I NEED MORE COWBELL”.

They respond in earnest – the peals of the cowbells, and their screaming and cheering for “guy number 430” carry with me for the next half mile.

At this point I am starting to feel the combined effects of the day, and it is at this point where a younger woman picks me off on a modest incline. For the sake of the dignity of old guys everywhere, I decide to return the favor and pass her, but her internal radar senses me and every time I work my way closer to her she speeds up, incrementally.

It is completely maddening, and further, after a mile of this I realize I have to pee. I charge into the brush and charge back out and have to make up some time to catch this gamine nemesis of mine.

She forces me to run eight minute miles to finish the race, a painful pace for me to sustain at this point, but I am closing on her as we weave into the finishing area and I feel like I have enough gas in the tank to be the nitwit who charges hard in the last 20 yards to take 214th place, instead of 215th.

I will be that nitwit, I vow to myself.

I set up for the pass, running just three paces behind her left shoulder.

Spectators are lining the finishing chute, and my plan is to turn the last corner just past a small footbridge and bolt ahead on the inside and then drift into the middle of the chute, assuming she's not going to be either willing or able to check a 180 pound Canadian out of the way.

Just as I turn and begin to lengthen my stride, both of my girls duck the tape and jump in front of me screaming "Dad!" at the top of their lungs, effectively halting me in my tracks. They jolt me to my senses.

I find and call out to Val and spin the girls so that we're all facing the line together, and shout "Let's go monkeys!"

So I finish 215th after all, with a girl on either hand, picking them up as I cross the line and delivering each girl a glorious, salty, kiss before I realize that I am now shouldering an extra hundred pounds on some very irritable legs and have to put them both down.

Sylvie steals my medal, and Leonie steals my water bottle and pretzels.

My arms are empty when Val crosses into the finish area and I am so happy to see her I am momentarily goofy, and pull her to me.

I'm done, my first Half is in the bag and, while spent, I feel good.

At 5:39 I am ahead of expectations, and my run split, at 1:48, is faster than I ran four out of the five half marathons I ran a decade ago when I was training for my first marathon.

There are a lot of ReserveAid folks around – as I took in water and wolfed down slices of watermelon, I kept bumping into them and comparing notes.

Withrow was aglow, deservedly, having enjoyed a breakthrough performance across every leg of the race.

Val and I caught up with the lovely Jess, who looked unnervingly fresh for someone who was in motion for over six hours. Having finished the prior year's race in the back of an ambulance, she came back to the Patriot looking for revenge, but her legs had other plans. Fighting a running battle with injuries all season, Jess was hit with muscle cramps on the bike right out of the gate. Her run, not surprisingly, was in turn compromised.

While she was in the midst of fuming about her ride, I asked about her bike split, which turns out to have been just ten minutes longer than mine... and my ride was mercifully devoid of malfunctioning quadriceps. How on earth do these people ride bicycles so quickly?

Val and I bumped into G-Money and Simmer in the line to get massages, and I promptly joined them. G-Money couldn't wait to tell me about Simmer's race, and as the details trickle out I can see why: Simmer had completely trumped G-Money's Devilman experience in terms of inadvertently doing everything completely wrong in a single race.

And we're not just talking about forgetting to fill up water bottles.

We're talking about failing to sleep at any time during the previous 24 hours, driving all night to make to check in at the last possible minute, forgetting to bring bike shoes so having to "race" the bike leg in your running shoes, and perhaps most impressively, having both of those same running shoes be left footed.

It suddenly occurs to me that there is some possibility I may have actually beaten Simmer in a race – tentatively, I ask him for his time.

If you must know, even with two left feet, Simmer is still faster than me.

I catch Dr Angela at the finish, and she confirmed to me that she was indeed the lone woman starting the event a solid five minutes behind her peers. Downing water she confided to me that "luckily there is no such thing as a ReserveAid wetsuit, otherwise I'd be giving the team a bad name."

And of KO, Moby incarnate?

The great pearlescent tower that was KO, combinedly possessed by all the angels that fell from heaven, somehow willed himself to push past the mortal limitations of his own knees, started running out there and didn't stop and bulled his way to the finish in a very respectable time.

And I have no idea how he did it.

Thinking about it, I have no idea how Simmer did it.

I have no idea how Jess did it.

I guarantee you the 32 year old me, interviewed at the finish line of the Brooklyn Half Marathon in 2002, would never have believed that the 42 year old me would beat him *after* an open water swim and a 56 mile bike ride.

I see all the ReserveAid folks in a group and am struck, feeling very sentimental.

I guess that's the lesson of these things, we decide to do them, and we do them, and then at the end we look around us and at each other all full of wonder and awe.

It's time to get moving.

We say our good-byes, the girls in tow, and Val shepherds me to the truck.

As she loads all my gear into the back, fixes the girls into their seats, deposits me into the passenger side and hands me some cold water, and asks me if I want to pay an emergency visit to the donut shop we passed on the way into town, I look at my wife and I suppose I do know, ultimately, the why and how of it after all.