

IRONMAN JOURNEY – WISCONSIN 2006

It is only fitting that I start my Ironman journey from where I left off last year. Most of you are aware that I was involved in a bike accident just prior to IM in 2005. After completing Ironman, I proceeded to Hawaii in Dec. with a dear friend, Kristin to run the Honolulu Marathon. In hindsight, I am now willing to admit that I was in no condition to participate in Ironman last year – but at the time it seemed like the right thing to do. In January I found myself laid up with a herniated disk. My doctor concurred that after the bike accident my body just couldn't keep up with the stress I was putting it through; hence my L5 vertebra said enough. I was still able to bike and swim over the winter, but advised not to run for 4-6 weeks. My doctor and therapist reassured me that completing another Ironman in September '06 was a reasonable quest. Because the Ironman was my race of the season, I was willing to concede running for a 'little while'.

Any runner will tell you taking a couple of weeks off of running is like a death sentence! Considering how cold it was outside, I was OK with taking January off from running, even February was OK. March I started to get antsy and aggravated. April I was beside myself. My body needed 15 weeks to recover without the impact of running. I felt I was on an emotional roller coaster – each week was a new hill or valley. Finally, in late April I was granted the gift to run outside for a whole 20 minutes.

Slowly and gradually I added more volume into my runs. There were a few scares throughout the course of summer when I questioned my body's ability to take on the amount of training needed. Unlike last season, I was willing to abort Ironman if it was going to impact my long-term ability to run pain free. At the end of July, and with the help of one of the city's best physical therapist, (Maureen George-Lincoln Park Accelerated Rehab), I felt confident I was going to make it to Ironman! And I was going to lay it all on the line!

The week prior to the race, my support team—aptly named Team Cassandra was in full force preparing T-shirts, banners, signs, and a race day spectator schedule. Being a spectator is hard work, especially for a race that is so long, not to mention the weather conditions that may prevail on race day. The forecast called for a 30% chance of showers later in the day, low of 52 – high of 63 degrees. It sounded ideal...cool, dry weather for the bike, perhaps a shower on the run. Perfect!

Ironman is a mass start of all athletes at 7am. Athletes need to swim 2.4 miles, ride 112 miles and run 26.2 miles to the finish. Everyone has 17 hours to complete the race otherwise they will be disqualified. IMWI '06 had the largest registration in IM history. They allowed 2,600 entrants to register (usually the field closes out at 2400 or some events at 2000). 2,439 athletes showed up to start the race on Sunday morning, only 2,172 actually crossed the finish line.

RACE MORNING 4:00am:

I wake with the thought of putting more fuel in my body. I feel good, excited, and well rested from the sleep I accumulated all week (because I certainly didn't sleep the night before the race). After loading up on carbs, Rob, mom and myself headed down to the transition area to prepare for the race. It was chilly outside – 52 degrees, winds coming out of the east, but no rain. This was a huge extreme from last year's temperature of 75 degrees at 5am.



6:30am: Team Cassandra was in place. I was feeling more confident with the swim this year. Last year I was tossed around like a rag doll in the water, as a virgin Ironman I was naïve to think my fellow competitors would “play nice” in the water. I learned my lesson. I was there to do the pulling, pushing and shoving if required. With all the excitement of race morning and Team Cassandra, time quickly escaped me. I hustled my way down to the swim start, there was a huge line of athletes waiting to get into the water – the race starts at 7am no matter if you are in the water or not. With one minute to spare, I was able to position myself in the warm, 70-degree water feeling good, calm and ready to do battle...I mean swim! ;)

7:00am: The cannon goes off and I wait a few seconds to go horizontal. The swim course is a giant rectangle. Each athlete must make 2 laps around the course to complete the 2.4 miles. The first lap of the swim is a bit dicey, I confidently negotiate my way through the first 1000 meters, careful to protect my head, deflect random hands and feet that are fluttering by my side. When I feel someone on my feet, I kicked even harder to create my own space. Unfortunately I made the mistake of taking the first turn too close to the buoy and find myself in a swimmer pile-up. Everyone is vertical at this point trying to do a breaststroke to get around the turn. Lesson learned...stay wider for the other turns. I make another turn and now swimming in the opposite direction we started. The current is NOT to our advantage; the water is very choppy with the ENE winds is hindering my ability to swim smoothly. I'm pretty confident I swallowed a bottle's worth of water! I was feeling a bit disoriented as I was being tossed around by the water.

I had a swim strategy this year—find someone who is holding a similar pace and draft! I found her; she had blue goggles and a blue cap. We swam stroke for stroke most of the last loop. It was perfect! My swim was more aggressive on the second loop, I did not hesitate to push people out of my way to hold her pace. I wasn't sure of my time, but felt confident I was giving it the best that I had. Finally I made my last turn to head into the finish. I run out of the water and cross the mat. The clock above me read **1:18:50**. I completed the swim almost 3 minutes faster than last year in worse conditions, but more importantly with NO bodily damage!

One of my favorite things in IM is the wetsuit ‘strippers’! Volunteers are assigned the duty of pulling off your wetsuit. As I ran out of the water, I looked for the cutest, hunkiest volunteer there was to pull off my suit [sorry Rob ;)]! In the process, I cut off another fellow swimmer to have my stripper of choice. Yes, I am having fun! Let the day begin. As I ran up the helix I locate Team Cassandra yelling and screaming my name! That’s my team!!!

8:30am: As I run through the transition area to retrieve my bike, the announcer is on the PA warning us that some of the roads are wet and slick due to localized rain, “ride with caution” is what he said. I’m thinking, “no big deal, just a passing shower”. I hop on my bike and head off for my 112-mile journey. A day or two leading up to the race, I was having wardrobe dilemmas. Will it be cold, cool, wet, warm – what the heck should I pack in my transition bags to wear? As a last minute detail, I bought a pair of \$1.99 nylon trouser socks. I cut off the toe and made a thumbhole so I could wear as disposable arm warmers; a great solution without having to wear long sleeves. Another last minute decision was borrowing a hanky from Rob, I always have tissues tucked under the leg of my riding shorts. As everyone knows who rides with me, I have an issue with the “farmer’s blow”. It just doesn’t land where it should! Hence, I thought if it were going to rain, my tissues would be a pile of mush and it would be nice to wipe my nose on something substantial.

8:45am: Not more than a few miles out on the bike course, there is a light sprinkle. “No worries, it just a passing shower”, that is what I told myself for the first hour on the bike. “It’s just a passing shower”. I’m feeling really good on the bike ride. When I checked my odometer, I was quite pleased, I cruised through the first 16 miles at an 18.4 mph pace. My legs felt fresh, the rain was somewhat refreshing, but I starting to have thoughts of the two 40-mile loops to come. The loops are technical, a lot of hills, a lot of sharp turns, and there was a lot of water on the roads. I kept telling myself, “just take it one mile at a time, feather your brakes, you have ridden in rain before, no worries”.

I had mastered my nutrition plan throughout the training season, I had my watch set up to beep every 20 minutes to keep me on an eating schedule. Thank goodness I had a liquid diet this year because 2 hours into the ride my fingers were numb. The rain, wind and 55 degree temperatures were making it a challenge to wiggle my fingers, grabbing a water bottle from my gage was just about the only thing I could do without fumbling.

Mile 40: I feel like I am having a great ride; negotiating the hills and descents with caution, feeling confident of my riding skills. However at this point, I have no idea of my pace. My computer is water logged and giving me incorrect information. I am getting very excited to see Team Cassandra positioned out on Old Sauk Road. Rob has calculated my time predictions and mileage so that Team Cassandra could maneuver the course like a well-oiled machine. As I approached Old Sauk I was a little disappointed to see the first hill empty of spectators. The rain had kept some fans away. As I climbed slowly and steady, I locate my Team. Sherri and Rob were making there way down the second hill, I feel like I caught them off guard but they were screaming and yelling as I passed by. “Ahhh”, just the little lift I needed to keep it going. Now I’m curious of how fast or slow I am riding, was I ahead of schedule or behind? I finish the first loop, half way in the ride at mile 56; bike time – **3:06:00**. I was very excited and on target for my predicted pace, and riding better than expected in the conditions!



Mile 80: Still raining, sometimes it's coming down hard, other times it's a sprinkle. If the rain stopped it was only temporary. The roads were soaked and the spray from everyone's back tire is dangerous and becoming a huge menace. The handkerchief stuffed in the leg of my shorts has become my little piece of heaven. I take it out to wipe the water and mud off of my face, it's warm from the heat of my body, and it has the scent of Rob. Heaven. I am now convinced that the showers are not 'passing' and I am cursing the weatherman... "30% chance of showers my arse, It's been raining for 4+ hours"! I'm starting to lose my steam. I'm uncomfortably soaked to the bone. My fingertips are cold, and I'm having a hard time shifting my big chain ring with my left hand. I actually had to use my right hand to shift my left gears. Not good. I see the aftermath of two different riders after they have wiped out descending a hill. They are not in good shape, aside from the road rash, they are obviously disoriented and shivering – probably hypothermic. After observing those riders, I kept telling myself, "stay focus, concentrate on what you are doing, be safe on the hills"! I am trying my hardest to find a psychological boost. It seemed that every straight we hit, inevitable there was a dreaded head and driving rain. We are not catching a break out here. I come around to Old Sauk Road again, as I turn the corner I see some members of my team, Kristin and Drew are on the corner waiting for me...screaming and yelling, routing me one. I am so EXCITED to see them – another piece of heaven!!! That was exactly the boost I needed! I thought for sure I'd be out there by myself for the final 30 miles. As I start climbing the hills, there's Rob! He's sprinting up the hill with me. I'm happy to report to him that I feel good. A little further up the hill my Mom, Sherri and Dave! "Holy Cow, this is great"! I had no idea they would be there for the second pass. I now have the motivation to get back into Madison, the sooner the better!

Mile 96: Visions of baby powder and warm DRY socks are floating in my head. I can't wait to put on dry clothes! I finish the second loop, and am doing my best to push through the remaining 16 miles. And push is exactly what I had to do. Last year the ride back into Madison felt like a piece of cake, not so much this year. The wind was in our face, the rain was driving and those little rollers out on Whalen Road felt like mountains. Ugh. I thought how excited I would be to

get off my bike and on my feet. “Warm dry socks, warm dry shorts” that is all I could focus on. I finally had the skyline of Madison in my sites. I ride up the helix and happily release my bike into the hands of a volunteer. “You can have it”, were my exact words to him. I check my time as I cross the mat. The second half of my bike ride was 19 minutes slower than the first half, but VERY pleased to finish the bike in **6:24:00**, still 7 minutes faster than last year!

2:54 PM: I am hustling my way through the transition. I needed to stay focused, last year my transition times were long. I think I had a tea party in T2. I grabbed my bag. I run to the changing room. A woman named Rebecca volunteered to assist in the soggy process of changing my clothes. G-d bless this woman. Donned with rubber gloves, Rebecca took off my cleats and socks. I’m shouting out for a little help from other athletes, “does anyone have baby powder... will pay, baby powder... anyone”?!?!? No luck, so sad – my feet were not going to feel the silky softness of baby powder. However, they were dry !!! I am struggling to get my riding gloves off, the \$1.99 trouser socks/arm warmers that I thought would be tossed after the first hour turned out to be the BEST \$2 I have ever spent! I make a complete wardrobe change and into dry clothes. Heaven!

I make it out of transition in 6 minutes, almost half the time it took me last year. I am very pleased, and pleased that my legs feel good! HOORAY! The rain has slowed down to a mere sprinkle. I turn the very first corner out of transition and my team is in place. Kristin and Drew greet me. Their energy and stamina was amazing and thoroughly addicting! I absorbed every ounce I could. They tell me the rest of the crew was further up the road. HOORAY, hooray. I’m running, I’m dry, I feel good. I see Rob’s red hat sticking out of the crowd, I see Sherri and Dave and Mom, everyone is electric. I love it! I’m having fun again! I pass the first mile marker and clock my split – 7:58 mile! “Holy cow, I need to slow down”. I’m not sure if I said that out loud or to myself. At this point I was feeling a bit delirious, I’ve been moving for 8 hours.

Mile 3: The vibe of downtown and the spectators is behind me. I’m making my way through the semi-baron streets just outside of Madison. The rain has kept most spectators close to town, but who could honestly blame them. Somewhere around mile 3 I have a reality check, “I have 23+ miles to run. Wow, the race is JUST beginning”. The reality of running a marathon has now sunken in. I find a guy who is running my pace. We settle into a conversation and hang for the next 10 miles.

Mile 13: I am still feeling relatively well. I have finished the first loop and have a psychological boost that there is a mere 13.2 miles to go! “One more lap around this course and I am DONE”! I see Team Cassandra scattered in various spots along the run-screaming and cheering. Love it. They are absolute troopers to be out the entire day in this weather! I am completely and thoroughly soaked from top to bottom. My toes are sloshing around in my sneakers. I worry that by the end of the race my feet will be uncomfortably covered in blisters! My run strategy is to keep a steady pace; slow down to a brisk 5-10 second walk to go through the aid. So far the strategy was working, and happy to see my split for the run was **2:06**.



Three hours into the run I start to feel a little nauseous and decide to switch to Coke at the next aid station to settle my stomach. It was delicious! I alternate between banana and Coke at the aid stations, as they were the only items my stomach and mouth could handle. Slowly I am losing my zip. By mile 18 fatigue is setting in, and the rain is coming down harder. The wind is blowing off the lake, and the temperature has dropped a few degrees. I'm watching other runners struggle to stay warm. The volunteers were handing out large plastic garbage bags and many athletes were fully donned in plastic or foil to keep warm and dry. Fortunately I have yet to feel really cold, of course it's chilly with the rain and wind, but I was still relatively comfortable, key word being RELATIVE!

Mile 20: I am fatigued, annoyed with the rain. I keep telling myself "move your ass Cassandra, move your ass...". At that moment it dawned on me that unlike last year, nothing out of the ordinary was hurting my body. I have no knee pain, no back pain, no physical ailment to hinder my mental stamina to run faster. "Mind over matter, mind over matter" I kept chanting those words to myself.

Mile 23: I walk through the aid station, sip my Coke and see a friend in the race run by me. That is all I needed to see. "Holy shit, that's Dana...she just cruised by me – I passed her in the bike a long time ago"! I now had a mission. My competitive side kicked in, and away I went! "Keep that pink jersey in your view, you are not stopping until you get across the finish line". I look at my watch, it was 6:47pm. I start negotiating the numbers, "if I run just 10 minute miles I can cross the finish line under 12:20:00. WOW, that would exceed my goal"! The last 3.2 miles were a blur literally and physically. My contacts were so uncomfortable I could not see clearly, and I was a bit disoriented from the long day.

MILE 26: I have the Capital in view...along with the pick jersey. I am SO close to the finish! I turn on to the main street, work my way up the small incline that feels like a giant hill at this point. I see Kristin and Drew jumping up and down, cheering me in through the final stretch. I am so EXCITED! I am so close. Next I see Rob cheering just as enthusiastically. "Wow, so close"! The final turn, I am on the red carpet!!! I see Sherri and Dave. I am so disoriented I don't even here my name announced, I take the final steps and cross the finish line. I look up at the clock. "**HOLY COW**" – **12:15:20**. I did it!!! I finished and exceeded my goal!!!

Another spectacular volunteer is by my side (literally holding me up). He wrapped me in a foil blanket to keep me warm and gave me my medal. Team Cassandra was positioned at the end of the gate cheering like rockstars, completely ecstatic for my finish. My volunteer looks at me, "do they belong to you". With a big smile on my face, I said "why, yes they do". He walked me over and released me into the hands of my Team. **What a crew. What a day. What a race!!!**

The official times were posted on Monday morning.
I placed #608 out of 2,439; #14 out of 120 in my age group!!!
WOW! I could not have done it without my Team. Thank you thank you thank you to everyone who supported me from near and far.

I did not sign up for next year's Ironman. However, I don't think this was the last one either! :)

