

## Race Report

### IronMan Lake Placid – July 20, 2008

#### Bishop Leatherbury

After perfectly beautiful, dry day on Saturday, the big day for IronMan Lake Placid came. I had been doing the normal IronMan thing and checking the forecast on Weather.com obsessively for the two weeks leading up to the race and as usual, the forecast was moving around. Saturday evening the forecast was for isolated thunderstorms in the afternoon on race day and I figured we could get through the bike leg of the race before the thunderstorms came in. Sunday morning, about 5:15 before leaving for the race, I checked one last time (hoping for an improvement in the forecast) and lo and behold it had gotten dramatically worse. The forecast was for rain all day with thunderstorms in the afternoon. The weatherman was dead accurate on that forecast!

After going by to pump our bike tires and put some last minute things in our transition bags, we headed down to drop off our special needs bags and get ready for the swim. The water temperature was perfect (about 70 degrees) and I had already had a great practice swim on Friday so I was feeling abnormally relaxed for an IronMan swim start. This was an “in the water” swim start and it was really funny to see all of the blue and pink heads bobbing in the water (someone had a good sense of humor to select baby blue and pink swim caps). After a few minutes in the water, the canon went off and the race was underway. If you have never done an IronMan, you can't imagine the chaos of an IM swim start. You and 2,000 + of your closest friends thrashing about in the water, competing for space and working hard to stay calm. In my first two IM's, my main thought during the first three or four hundred yards of the swim was “this is my last IronMan. I will never do this again.” It is indeed scary with people bunched together, competing for the same space. It is not uncommon to get kicked and hit and some have even had their goggles ripped off their face during the early part of the swim. Lake Placid was no different but I felt much more confident and calmer and relaxed.

One of the distinctive features of IM Lake Placid is that there is a white cable that is strung along the course which holds the buoys. The cable is visible underwater which means if you are close enough to the cable, you don't have to sight. Since I am notoriously bad at staying on course, this feature was a real boon to me. Of course, it also meant the same thing to many others so the swim was much more bunched together than normal and I had a lot more contact with other competitors.

Part way through the swim, I noticed that it had begun to rain. The rain would be a constant companion throughout the remainder of the day. Upon reaching the end of the two loop swim, I emerged from the water and had my wetsuit pulled off by the peelers (a really nice feature of IronMan races). The run to transition was about a block or a block and a half – the longest run to transition I have seen to date. There were an incredible number of fans along the run to transition despite the steady rain – the fan support would be another constant feature of the day.

The rain and the previous competitors had turned the inside of the transition tent into a muddy mess. It was so muddy, I was worried about gumming up my cleats as I ran to get my bike. The one thing that was missing from transition was the nice ladies that usually apply sunscreen to the athletes. There was no need for that today!

The bike course started with a five plus mile climb followed by a five mile descent into Keene. The climb was not bad and I was feeling strong going up the hills but nervous because of the conditions. On the descent, which was fairly steep at places, I was very nervous given the rain and poor condition of the roads and I took the descent cautiously and slowly this first time. As I was doing the descent, I thought about how cold and miserable the day was going to be and hoped I would make it through the day. My main worry was whether my hands would cramp. As many who have cycled with me in the cold have learned, I inherited a condition from my mother called Reynauld's Syndrome that results in poor circulation in my extremities when I get cold and causes my hands to not function well. During that downhill, I recommitted myself to doing whatever it took to finish the race. After all, I am an IronMan and I had worked very hard to get here. Plus, I had raised over \$20,000 for Samaritan House and had an incredible group of supporters – I could not let them down and I was not going to let myself down.

The bike course, while touted as being one of the more difficult bike courses in the IM North America series because of the hills and climbing, was not that bad and the training regimen that Tony had put us through had prepared me well. The course was stunningly beautiful. About a fourth to a third of the course was along rivers and the view of the rivers and mountains was breathtaking.

Well, despite the beautiful scenery and good training, I had to deal with the fact that it was raining during the entire bike leg of the race and my hand strength was declining as cramping set in. I lost the ability to shift at mile 37. I was able to shift gears only by stopping and using my wrist to push the shift lever. What that meant is that I rode much of the race in the same gear. Far from ideal! When going up hills, I was virtually always in too big a gear. I was having to power up the hills which meant unnecessary wear and tear on my legs. When going up gentler grades or on the flats and downhills, I was almost always in too small a gear which meant I was losing speed.

The fun continues – at mile 66, my hands had gotten so cramped that I was no longer able to use my brakes. I realized that when I was going about 30 miles an hour and flew by a sign that said "Truckers Caution – Use Lower Gear Ahead". After a few moments of panic and desperately trying to apply pressure to the brakes, I gave in to a fast descent. It was a curvy mountain descent on rough roads and I just hung on for dear life and prayed, remembering the cross in my pocket that I got at the Church service Saturday evening when the athletes were blessed. I just picked a line and went for it. While it was frightening, it was also exhilarating. Fortunately, there was a modest uphill at the bottom of the five miles which naturally slowed me down. As I approached Keene, I remembered the sharp left hand turn at the bottom of a small hill and slowed down using the tried and true "Barney Rubble technique". That's right! I unclipped my left foot and put it down on the pavement bracing my calf against the pedal to slow down.

Around mile 75, I started shivering and was worried about hypothermia. At the next rest stop, the volunteers cut head and arm holes in a trash bag and I wore that for the rest of the bike leg and almost half of the run. The latest in cycling fashion!! Not very aerodynamic but very functional! It was a real lifesaver.

The other effect of my having cramped hands was that my nutrition plan went to hell in a hand basket! During an IronMan, I burn between 8,000 and 9,000 calories. That means that I need to consume around 4,000 to 4,500 calories during the race to fuel the engine. Most of those calories need to be consumed during the bike leg of the race as the body does not process food well on the run. My plan was to eat every 15 to 20 minutes on the bike and that did not happen. So one more thing to worry about!

I finally finished the bike leg in around 7:30 – about an hour and half slower than I was capable of doing. Boy, was I glad to get off the bike. It was great to see Suzanne and Alicia Kessler as I finished the bike. What IronMates being out there in the rain. Back to the transition tent/mud pit. A wonderful volunteer took my shoes and socks off, dried off my feet and put on dry socks and my running shoes. Remember, my hands were useless. That man was truly an angel! It really felt great to have on dry socks and running shoes – a short lived experience as the heavens opened up and it really started pouring as I began the run.

The great thing is you don't need to be able to use your hands to run. I have never been happier to start a run during a triathlon! The spectator support was incredible as I headed out on the run. I heard Aimee Henderson and Jill Ragland yelling for me which was a real boost – what IronSpectators! To all the spectators, you don't know what a difference you make!

The run course was quite challenging. There is quite a bit of downhill on the first three miles which is hard on already tired quads. At about three miles, we passed the Olympic ski jumps – an impressive sight. On this first loop, it was raining so hard, I could not even see the top of the ski jump! We then headed down three or four miles to a turnaround and back to town. This was the longest part of the run and was absolutely beautiful. It was quite pastoral – we ran by a large red New England barn and much of the run was by a river that was running very strongly with all of the day's rain. Midway through the first loop, the rain stopped (10:45 into the race) and on the way back, I got a great view of the ski jumps from the base of the jump. Talk about steep! Even the slope below the jump is steeper than I would want to go down.

The run was a two loop run, very typical for an IronMan. That means another loop through town to absorb more energy from the spectators and then back out for a second loop. It also means that you run right by the finish line before heading out for another 13.1 miles. You run within a couple hundred yards of the finish and can hear Mike Riley's booming voice saying "XYZ, You are an IronMan" along with all of the loud music and cheering of the finish line crowd. You might think it is difficult to run by the finish line and then head out for another 13.1 miles but it really isn't. The finish line is not a couple of hundred yards away – it's 13.1 miles away.

As I headed out for the second loop, the downhill slope of the first three miles was really punishing. Because of the damage of the downhill along with the cumulative effect the day's efforts, around mile 16, I had to switch from a solid run to run/walk. I would walk two minutes and then run eight to ten minutes. That provided enough relief to get me through the rest of the race, albeit, more slowly. As I headed back into town, there were still a hearty group of fans (albeit, the crowd was thinner) to provide support and cheer the runners on. Unbelievable – these people had been out there all day in the rain and were still out there at 9:00 pm!

As I headed up Main Street with about two and a half miles to go, I drew energy from the upcoming finish and ran the entire last two and a half miles. Most everyone was walking by that point and it was nice to be passing people. As I made the right hand turn to take the final out and back, I saw Suzanne right at the turn, under her umbrella waiting for me. What an awesome wife to stand out there in the rain all that time.

Lake Placid's finish line is the best I have ever experienced in many years of racing. Yes, I'm sure it had something to do with the difficult day. However, that wasn't the entire reason. As you come off the final out and back, you come through a large IronMan arch and onto the Olympic speed skating track. As I entered the turn, the crowd was huge and was cheering as if I were the very first athlete they had seen that evening. You can't imagine the boost that gave me. The crowd cheered wildly as I ran the quarter lap of the track to the finish line with hands held high and a huge smile on my face.

While this was my slowest IronMan finish (14:48:38) by 45 minutes and was an hour slower than Coeur d'Alene last year, I treasure this one the most. It was definitely the hardest earned. I do feel I could have done an hour and a half better in different conditions but the conditions were what they were. Do I have any regrets – absolutely none. I am an IronMan!