

Surviving the Ironman



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I'M ON the starting line of the Frankfurt Ironman Competition. It's July 5th 2009 and I feel nervous. I know I have trained well, but will I be able to cope with the full distance of the Ironman: a 3.8-kilometre swim, 180-kilometre bike ride and 42.2-kilometre marathon?

I know I have to pace myself. I can't go flat out, though patience is not a virtue that I possess.

My start is at 6:45 am. Bang! And we're off. My rhythm feels good, one-two-one-two. I come out of the water in one hour and 7 minutes, and I'm relatively happy with my time.

I run around to transition, take off my wet-suit and change into my biking gear. I start cycling with relative ease, trying to find a good rhythm. The first 12 kilometres are gentle, a bit downhill.

I begin eating my energy gels, one every half hour. I stick to the plan until the end, and end up gulping down 21 energy gels and some 10 litres of liquids during the journey.

The Frankfurt countryside is beautiful... and fortunately not too hilly. Every little village is packed with cheering spectators. They give me energy. *Danke sehr!* I keep a steady, conservative pace, and finish the 180 kilometres in 5 hours and 21 minutes. My odometer tells me that my average speed is about 34 kilometres per hour.

The transition to the run feels smooth. I have done it countless times in training, but I've never faced a marathon after a long bike ride. I pace myself. Four loops of 10.5 kilometres. I feel confident.

I am focused on my own race. Not once do I feel like stopping. I am going for my own dream. I want to finish.

There's a service station every 1.5 kilometres. I use each one of them. The pattern remains the same: ice down my back, water, a sip of Pepsi Cola or Red Bull, and finally four sponges of ice cold water over my head.

My family cheers me on. Every time I

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see them I feel better, my steps feel lighter. I try to stay focused, kilometre after kilometre. I do not allow myself to think about the finish. Stick to the plan! Drink, take a gel, cool down. Keep at it.

I approach the final turning point. I know I only have some 400 metres to go. I can see my dream at the end of the tunnel. I allow myself to see it. I feel delirious. I don't remember any of it, yet I remember it all.

I firmly believe that one hour of exercise gives you two hours of extra energy a day.

Two hundred metres to go before the finish line. I see thousands of spectators and a Finnish flag, which I grab. I throw my running cap into the crowd. I wave the flag and high five the crowd. I don't want it to end.

Then I see my children and my wife. The kids jump over the barrier and race me to finish. We embrace. I cry.

I have never experienced anything like this. My marathon time was 4 hours. The whole journey took a total of 10 hours, 35 minutes and 45 seconds. Every second was worth it.

I am escorted to the athletes' area together with the others. I jump into a bucket of ice and look around to see a bunch of tired smiles. All of those who finish the Ironman hug and congratulate each other. We know that we are a bit crazy, but at least we are crazy and happy.

Why am I telling you this story? Because I firmly believe that one hour of exercise gives you two hours of extra energy per day. Your mind needs your body as much as your body needs your mind. And both need cultivation.

I am not advocating that everyone should do the Ironman, quite the contrary. Moderation is a good thing in exercise. You don't need to do an Ironman to be an Ironman.

But if you feel like going for an Ironman, now you know what it feels like. It's a fantastic, once in a lifetime, experience! ■■

