

The Power of Preparation, the Magic of Belief



Notes from Ironman Orlando 70.3

It was a most peculiar feeling as we mounted our bikes to ride from the Magic Kingdom Parking lot to Disney's Wilderness lodge for the Saturday race check in. There was the odd mix of a familiar place seen in a very different context.

I knew this place best through the excitement of a child's eyes, yet today I was visiting it with the pre-race excitement that I know so well from triathlon racing. It was to be a most interesting couple of days.

The Ironman 70.3, often referred to as a half Ironman triathlon, is comprised of the three disciplines in exactly half of the distance of a full Ironman race, being a 1.2 mile swim, a 56 mile bike and a 13.1 mile run for a total of 70.3 mile race

On this Saturday, the day before the race, we arrived for the mandatory race kit pick-up and bike check in around noon. It was indeed getting hot.

In speaking to several racers and some of the pros who had done the race in previous years, we learned that this event can be about heat management, we understood now why the race was scheduled to start at 6:20 am,

The Walt Disney World Resort is the world's largest and most visited recreational resort, covering a 40-square-mile (100 km²) area and encompassing four theme parks, two water parks, 24 on-site themed hotels, and other entertainment and recreational venues throughout the entire resort complex.

By comparison, Toronto's largest park is High Park spanning 398 acres, (1.61 km²) while Vancouver's Stanley Park covers an area of 1,001 acres. New York's Central Park sprawls across 843 acres between 59th Street and 110th Street and is 0.5 miles (0.8 km) wide between Fifth Avenue and Central Park West.

Doing the math you could see that you could put all three of these parks into the Disney resort 10 times over.

When the Magic Kingdom opened in 1971, the site employed about 5,500 "cast members". Today it employs more than 66,000, spending more than \$1.2 billion on payroll each year. This is the largest single-site employer in the United States.

This place is huge. It is American commercialism on its grandest scale, and its' commerce is magic. They sell magical rides, magical moments, magical holidays. Their mandate suggests that they have failed if you leave their park feeling that your visit was anything short of magical.

I get all of that, I was intrigued by the venue and how this would shape our Ironman 70.3 experience

I met Linda, my training and life partner, about a year and a half ago. We quickly realized that we had many common interests and one common goal. We both had an Ironman race in our sights.

I had a strong cycling background and Linda a strong running background, we both agreed to help each other in their weaker disciplines en route to our goal

Our first cycling experience was a rather innocuous 40 km flat ride for coffee, by the time we returned Linda was struggling to climb bridge overpasses and finished with a very sore knee. She clearly had a lot of work in front of her.

She invested in a new bike and the next season brought greater training efforts, greater distances and greater challenges. There were demanding rides in Muskoka on which she swore she would never do an Ironman distance ride. There were ominous rides in Italy of double digit grades that she wanted to quit on but never did. She's a fighter and she had a goal.

When we finally decided to do our first full Ironman race together, we knew it was a comprehensive undertaking and Linda needed a plan. Finding a plan that makes sense for a couple is an undertaking, but manageable. Of course following the plan when life and work continually get in the way is indeed a more difficult thing.

Linda pushed hard at the training and finally one day told me why following the plan was so important to her, and it was so simple really. She said that if she found a plan she believed in and did the work therein, when self-doubt tried to creep in at any point on race day, she could believe in herself and her ability to not only get through the race, but, to have fun doing it because *she knew she had prepared properly*.

It's simple really, but so many enter new things in life ill prepared and doubt themselves. For many more it can be easy to do the preparation work but making the leap from preparing to believing is much more difficult. Linda's simple logic and plan made so much sense.

We rose at 3:30 a.m. on race day to fuel, dress and make our way to the parking lots where the endless parade of busses would get the 2100+ racers to the site for the final preparations in advance of the 6:20 race start.

This morning was perfect for racing; temperatures in the 70's, calm air, and nothing but stars above in the pre-morning sky. It looked to be a day where something really special could happen

The hours before a triathlon race can be busy, hectic, full of tension, jittery, at times making it really hard to focus. But somehow on this day everything moved along on plan for us. As I made my way towards the swim start along the beautiful sandy beach with the days first rays of light cutting through the darkness, I was unusually calm and ready. The uncertainty and fear of entering the water with hundreds of other racers just wasn't there. Today perhaps for the first time, I felt like a tri-athlete; perhaps the months (years) of preparation had started to create a fundamental mind shift, perhaps today was to be a great day

The Ironman 70.3 races feature "wave starts" rather than the "mass start" of a full Ironman race. On this day there were to be over 2100 racers entering the water in 20 separate waves over a period of more than one hour.

The first wave was to be the pro men, at 6:20 a.m. Many of us gathered along the lake edge to watch them go off, and minutes before the scheduled start the Star Spangled Banner was sung. It was a surreal moment; with the first rays of daylight cutting through the darkness, hundreds of racers in swim suits and goggles standing in silence paying tribute to a country that many would say could be defined by the very place at which we stood. Walt Disney World; the essence of U.S. commercialism, the essence of how far reaching one man's vision can go, the essence of this land of opportunity, the essence of freedom, the essence of belief.

At the end of this song's rendition, I think we all felt compelled to applaud. We were all part of that same moment, feeling privileged to be about to dip our toes in the magical waters of opportunity.

This race was a “beach start” in that one foot had to remain on land before your wave was to go off. The wet foot confirmed that the water temperature was well over 80 degrees this morning, and it felt great. It was especially great for us Canadians who would otherwise be fighting very cold waters in wet suits in our early season races, this was going to be fun.

The swim can be a real challenge for many tri-athletes and especially us “novice swimmers”. One can train, work on technique, and convince yourself you will swim at your own pace. However, when the gun goes off, the adrenaline floods the veins and the thrashing of arms and legs all around makes it hard not to race, hard to keep your heart rate down and breathing at a moderate level.

Despite my pre-race calm, this swim wasn’t really much different for me. Although in control all of the way, it was really only after the 750m turn buoy that I felt my breathing settle down and my stroke really got into a groove. It was a good swim regardless and I reached the swim exit calm, with moderate heart rate and ready to get on the bike.

The first thing that hit me at this point was the magic of the weather. Although it was not yet 7:30 a.m., the air was warm and getting on the bike in wet clothes and quickly accelerating to above 30 km/hr, I was not the least bit chilled, this felt so good.

This 90 km bike course spends most of its first half within the Disney park road system. These road systems are designed to move large amounts of cars and busses in and out every day and thus are very wide, house many lanes, many ramps and endless overpasses. It was wonderful to ride these perfectly paved roads with plenty of space around, in the early morning light before the park was officially open to traffic. It felt safe and special, a rare chance and a fun way to see a Disney Park “waking up”.

Although this was a fast course and there was always a good wind buffeting and cooling your body, it became obvious as the hours went by that the temperatures were starting to rise dramatically.

The last 10 km were into a head wind and as I started to push harder to keep my speed up, I couldn’t help but think about the comments / warnings we had heard from the racers the day before. There was clearly a hot and difficult run ahead and it just seemed smart to let the bike speed drop and save the legs for the upcoming run.

As soon as we entered the bike to run transition area, the breeze had stopped, the air was still and the heat was oppressive. It was going to be everything we had been told about, the next couple of hours were going to be more about heat management than running.

The run course for this race is a triple 4+ mile loop within the Wilderness Lodge area of Disney, it is a mix of paved road and grassy trails. There were aid stations at every mile and they were well equipped with ice, sponges, chilled Gatorade, water and tons of encouragement. The volunteers were great and would happily douse you with ice water on request.

Although I could see the effect the heat was having on many of the racers turned walkers, I felt good going out and had to fight to keep my pace moderate to see how my body would react to the heat, I wanted to go faster but felt I should save my energy and really give it up on the last lap.

However, running past the lap/finish cut off for the second time I knew I didn't have much kick left, the heat was really zapping me of all the energy I thought I had. The last four miles were going to be a struggle

By the time I entered the final stretch, the heat and the day had taken its toll on me also, I really had nothing left, it was just time to get in and finish this thing.

As I crossed the finish line and stopped in the finishing area, the fatigue and the heat of the day became slightly overwhelming. I needed to get something cold, find a quiet spot and just cool down. With my medal on, ice cold water in hand I found a shady spot to just collect myself.

I soon felt a tap on my back and turned to find an ironman official behind. I thought I was about to be told to move out of the finishing area. However he had come to tell me that there was a lady on the other side of the fence looking for me.

I turned to see Linda and the most incredible, joyous smile. I immediately knew that she had not only raced her race and met her goal, I was sure she had beaten me on the bike. I just knew it, and I was so happy for her.

We subsequently learned that this girl who could barely cross a bridge overpass without pain 18 months ago had indeed completed the 90 km bike course in pounding Florida 94° heat a couple of minutes quicker than I. She had a great, you might say, magical day out there!



Many, especially from outside the athletic community look at people like us as though we are foolhardy, wasting time and energy racing and training for races we don't really expect to win. What is the point of all of this?

You've heard many of the answers before, about the enhanced fitness and increased sense of well being, the stress relief, the increased zest for life, and perhaps about pushing back at middle age.

However, if you look hard enough, there are usually valuable life lessons in the pursuit of sport; people change, incredible things can happen.

On this day, it was all about the power of preparation and the magic of belief.

Oh, and the awesome smile that can result from those two.