

My Triathlon Journey...

They say IronMan will turn everything you think you know upside down and challenge you in ways you never expect. “They” sure do know what they’re talking about!

It was probably 8 or 9 years ago that I found out (much to my disappointment) that I was not invincible. It wasn’t just the shattered collar bone that put me on my ass for a few months. It might have been the torn MCL I suffered from a hit to my left knee, my first game back after 8 months away from ice hockey – compounded by recent back and neck ache pain. The Doctor said, welcome to your mid 30’s.

In short, he said you can do all the things you want to do, but if you’re going to put these demands on your body, you have to keep it in shape. He then explained it doesn’t happen automatically after you’re 30. That was my wake up call. I decided I didn’t want to stop doing all of the awesome things I loved to do. So, I took the doctor’s advice (maybe the only time that’s happened!) forced myself into the gym, set up a routine, followed through and in very little time, lost 40 pounds, felt stronger than ever, and regained the energy level that I hadn’t had since I was a kid!

About a year after that, I stumbled upon some TV coverage of something called IronMan. I was intrigued. Not by the brawn of the event. More captivating were the inspirational stories of the seemingly insurmountable odds so many people had worked so hard to overcome to achieve this incredible feat of Swimming 2.4 miles, Biking 112 miles, and then running a full 26.2 mile marathon. I was mesmerized watching them cross the finish line. I was captured by the intensity of emotions. And though I knew I couldn’t run down the block without my knees hurting, or even swim in a straight line, I wondered if I had what it takes to be an IronMan. I wondered.

In 2004 I saw an opportunity to test the waters and take on my first triathlon. It was the Montauk Point Lighthouse sprint triathlon. As a Sprint distance event, it involves basically a ½ mile swim, a 16 mile bike and a 5k run. At the time, it was an overwhelming notion to try any of these except the bike, never mind combine all of them into one race! My awesome fan club will attest that, as they watched me collapse crossing the finish line, I might have just died then and there. As athletic and adventurous as I was... This was NOT Ted’s sport!!!



Just don’t tell Ted that! It wasn’t more than ½ hour after I recovered that I proclaimed my desire to do it again. But for me, doing it again referred only to triathlon, not the distance. Not wasting any time, I signed up for my next big challenge, The Greater Burlington, Vermont Olympic distance triathlon – basically twice the distance of a Sprint race.

Yes, I was on the road to IronMan and achieving the goal that I had set for myself (Iron Man by the time I'm 40) with more than a great deal of uncertainty. For the record, ya can't do this alone. Without my family and friends rooting me on through even the most pathetic of performances, I don't know how I would have kept going. Still, I wanted a partner, and I knew that my cousin Bob, freshly transplanted from a 7 year stint in Jackson Hole, was a prime candidate for this abusive adventure.



Burlington was our first race together. Burlington taught my fan club that Ted was not a swimmer. They already knew I wasn't a runner, with misaligned knees that I inherited from my Dad. Somewhere between my snails pace plowing through Lake Champlain and my seeming lack of direction as I continued to zigzag my way through the water, it was obvious that Ted's love of water sports and all things water related had not translated into an ability to swim straight or for any significant distance!

Still getting out of the water, hearing nothing but crickets and feeling all alone in T1 (the first of two transition areas in a triathlon) as I got onto my bike, I wasn't too discouraged. I knew the bike event was ahead of me and that was my strong point. Sure enough, my strength on the bike allowed me to pick off riders (even Bobby) in a methodical one, by one manner slowly advancing and making up lost time from my swim. That would at least give me more time to deal with the run – now a 10k and once again, further than I had ever run before.



At least at the end of this race, I stayed on my feet! Until, of course, my PT sister, Hayden administered what was to become my ritual post-tri massage.



That was enough for that summer and gave me time to think, time to figure out a training plan, find a used Tri-bike on e-bay because \$5000 bikes don't exactly fit into my budget, and sign up with Bobby for the Tupper Lake TinMan triathlon next summer. The TinMan was going to be a huge stretch for me. 1.2 mile swim, 56 mile bike race, and then ½

marathon. The Adirondacks are notoriously hilly so I knew this race would be a great prelude to the Lake Placid IronMan, but IronMan still seemed so far out of my reach. As

the summer of 2005 approached and June's TinMan challenge became a reality, I was determined to just try and survive these crazy distances. No pushing too hard or burning out, and a big focus on conservation to save my knees. Adirondack weather is notoriously unpredictable. My first TinMan race was no exception. Record high temps



for the TinMan race were recorded at 96 degrees. Shy of moving to Arizona, I'm not sure how you can train for that. Still, I survived the swim, made it through the bike with knee pain only for the last 14 miles, and then it was on to the run underneath a relentless midday sun. But everyone had to deal with the sun, so even accomplished runners were held back and forced to walk from time to time. That only helped me with my knees' unique tolerance for running up any hills while having to walk down hills that I encounter. I had fun passing so many people on the uphill sections even though many would turn around and pass me back on the following downhill section of the course. In the end, I finished just under 7 hours. I was in tremendous pain, BUT, I was not overly exhausted and I still felt strong.

One month later, I found myself glued to my broadband connection and IronMan Live's coverage of the Lake Placid IronMan. What a show! Triumph, tragedy, and an event so electrified by the 20,000 spectators and volunteers, that you could feel it just by watching – even up until the very last person crossed, Just under the 17 hour cut-off. The next morning at 10am, I was one of the “lucky” ones to get through and register for IronMan USA 2006 before it sold out.



Enter 2006. Just one year left before the big “40”. IronMan looms large and the thought of my knees holding out through so much torture and even the training to get to the torture was not looking good. Still, I had my goal and IronMan was just over the horizon.

Fast forward to June. After 6 months of hard core day and night training, a self-imposed refrain from alcohol and way too little sleep the TinMan is here. For the first time, I'm repeating a triathlon distance. And now, I've added shin splints to my collection of ailments. Bobby and I signed up for the Tupper Lake Tinman again. But this time it was a day of training towards the Lake Placid IronMan – just a month away. The good news is that Bobby and I were committed to not “racing” through this one. This was first and foremost a distance training exercise and neither of us wanted to do anything that would interfere with our end goal. IronMan USA in exactly one month. We crossed the finish line together, still beat our times from last year and aside from my leg pains, we both felt strong, we both felt great, we both felt Ready!

That may have been the last time we were going to feel so ready. The following 3 weeks were a brutal combination of recovering (quickly), getting our last bit of training in, and wondering. Wondering if we trained right, if we ate right, if we should have done this, this way or that, that way. Thinking more and more about the gravity and sheer magnitude of the distances involved – even comparing them to distances between cities, wondering if we could really do this.

Nervousness, fear, and anxiety filled the week leading up to the race. My training buddy Joe Altomare had done Lake Placid before along with a few others. Heck, he's done Hawaii twice. He truly is an IronMan and was kind enough to let my crew stay in a house that he rented for his family just off of the race course and less than a mile from the Olympic center where it all takes place. Calm as can be, his routine's down pat, and a wealth of information for a scared newbie not sure what to expect. And that's just it. He said you can train for all of the physical challenges, but you never know what IronMan will throw at you. And it's those obstacles that will test your ability to adapt, adjust, and persevere through pain you never could have imagined for a victory like nothing else you could ever dream of.

Race day morning. 4 am. Already awake, in nervous anticipation of the alarm. Sleep the night before consisted of a few sporadic hours of rest. Pretty much what I had expected. Joe's awake too. Time to stretch, eat, stretch some more, and eat some more. It's still raining, but not as hard as the day and night before. It is still dark. 5 am means it's time to grab the rest of the gear and start walking to the race area to get body marked and drop off our last bags of gear. The rain has subsided and cool rolling clouds dot the evergreen scenery with a peaceful mist. By 6 am we are heading to the start. The crowd of spectators grows and you can feel the excitement start to build. The whole family feels it too. They share in both the fear and the excitement. There are so many unknowns and so many potential pitfalls that can shatter dreams and melt away years of training and preparations in an instant. 6:45 am and the wetsuits are on. The kids want hugs but we have to activate our electronic timing chips racers wear, to track time and position throughout the race. For this, we need to go through the swim gate across the lake from where our crew is set up to watch. Bobby and I make our way over, high-five each other as we cross the threshold. We're in it now. Nothing else matters. Focus on the mission at hand, take this one stroke, one pedal, and one stride at a time, and let's have some fun out there.



The only thing crazier than racing an IronMan with a field of 2,200 competitors, is that this race is a mass start! Kind of like a liquid mosh pit. Hold on, it's gonna be a wild ride. National anthem's over, countdown clock reads 6:57 as Bobby and I make our way back to the far shore to kiss the kids and try to get a swim position a little outside of the mayhem. The kid's are crying with both anxiety and excitement. Bobby and I try and make our way up the shore but he cuts his foot on the way. It's going to be a very long day. And with the thunderous crack of the start-cannon, the race is on. The crowd erupts, the skies open up with rain, and IronMan USA 2006 is under way... ready or not.

Using a strategy I read about in an email I received from a local NY tri shop, I decided to try and block out all of the chaos around me. Create a sort of shield and allow all of the slamming elbows and thrashing heels to bounce off me knowing any colliding I felt was also being felt by the person next to me. No energy to spare on wasteful negativity. Focus on the job at hand and just get it done. Picking out pockets of darkness in front of me, I was able to make some good progress up the lake even though I was on the outside and would have a bit farther to swim. Coming back down the lake, the chop wasn't as bad, and I came around for my second lap feeling steady and strong. Still, one more lap to go and the second laps are never easy for me. Random tunes play through my head, interrupted occasionally by the thump of a fist or the knock of an elbow. I was able to stave off most heel strikes on the second lap. They're always painful. Approaching the swim exit and I'm feeling strong. I pick it up a bit and get some good speed to put me in front of a crowd I was stuck behind for the final minutes of the swim. Up onto land, instant leg cramp from the lack of blood in the lower body. A quick stretch, help from a race volunteer to peel off my wetsuit and it's off to Transition 1. A 300 yard run down the carpeted street to the Olympic speed skating oval where our bikes are lined up and waiting to go. Sort of.



First you have to find your bag hanging in race number order among a rack system of 2200 other racer's bags. Racers get a bag for the swim to bike and bike to run transitions.



Then you make your way to the changing tent, try to find a place to sit, get your gear out of your bag, try not to forget anything (that would make an already long day even longer), make sure your helmet is clipped to avoid disqualification, and finally head out to the bike racks. By now the rain has subsided but the bikes are still covered with our make-shift protection to keep components on our bike that we'd rather stay dry from getting any wetter than they have to.

It was at this point, sitting in the changing tent when I hear the announcer pumping up the crowds, proclaiming "1 hour and 20 minutes into IronMan USA 2006". Wait! Did he just say 1 hour and 20 minutes???

As stated, swimming has never been 'my event'. My best guess of a swim time was about 1:45, 2 hours if I was having



trouble, maybe a little less if things were going great, but out of the water, AND down to T-1 in 1:20?!?!

For me, this race, was never really about racing. This event was for me, a test... A test of endurance, a test of perseverance, a test of my ability to fight through and keep going. I've referred to it as "my personal Mt. Everest". My stated goal of the day was to simply finish. 16:59 or better. IronMan gives you just 17 hours to complete the race before they turn off the lights and go home.

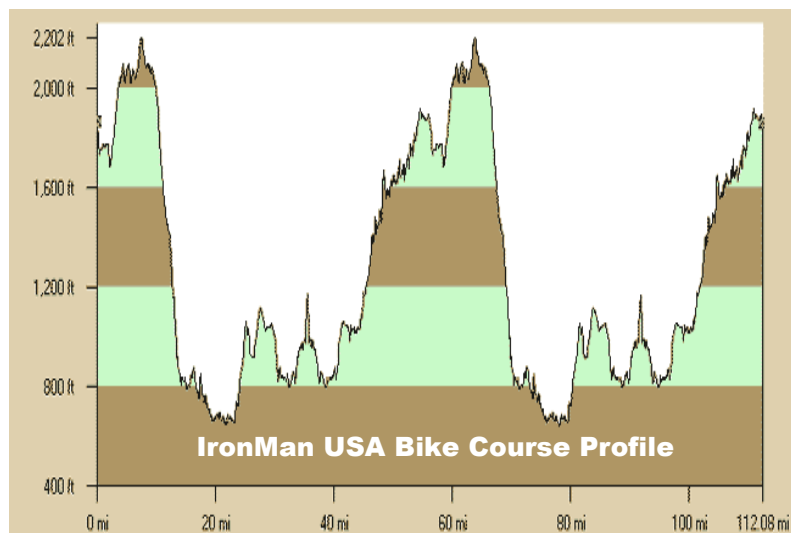


And now, I'm in the race! Never before had I seen so many bikes at a T-1. Usually at the first transition, my bike is rather lonely because the other racers beat me out of the water and are long gone. Sure, I'd have to still suffer through the run. There would be no getting around it. My knees and my shins were not going to be happy. The fact is, most people who do this have already conquered the amazing feat of a Marathon and usually more than once. This was going to be twice as far as any distance I had ever tried to run. At least now, I might have a chance to get done with it early.

All I would need to do was get through the bike. No heroics, no speed records, just do what you do best – consistent efficient pedaling, use the terrain, rest when you can, and enjoy the ride.

Heading out onto the bike course, I was thrilled to have so much company. I was in the race and it was a blast! Bikes, 4 across and as far as you could see in front and in back of me. Weaving, advancing, steadily picking off riders in front of me while other faster riders did the same to me. This was great. But this is IronMan. And it was soon to live up to its reputation.

This hilliest of all IronMan courses starts out with about 6 miles of steady climbing as we head out of Lake Placid. Then on the way to Keene Valley, the course gives its first breather in the form of a series of screaming downhill's where some riders have clocked speeds over 50 miles per hour. I hit 47.3 and it's fun in that on-the-edge Ted-fun kind of way. Great for giving the legs a quick rest, but don't lose



focus for a second! Not at those speeds. Cascade Canyon is beautiful, the sun is getting hot, and the ride is about to turn towards Jay, where we'll cross a long valley corridor before we reach the next steep climb in Wilmington.

I know every bit of extra "push" I give here will mean less time that my knees hold up for the second loop of the bike course and the run, so I'm constantly reining it in and just cranking away some steady miles. Nutrition plan is right on track. Good job consuming extra during the first climb to make up for the inevitable swim deficit and now maintaining a well-paced food, drink, drink, food... rhythm. The goal is to achieve an intake that is just as much as your body needs. Too much is a waste and will only bog you down, while not enough will deplete your resources, reducing your immediate available energy and power and taking away from the reserves your body will likely need on the run.

Another bit of well-intended advice is to only race with what you train with. Makes sense, and I thought I had that part of it down. I used the food I have been using and they serve Gatorade on the course. And Gatorade is Gatorade, right? Well, That's what I thought. There's a new and enhanced Gatorade on the market that they're promoting because of the added nutrients, minerals, electrolytes, and something that is supposed to make you want to drink more to keep you fully hydrated and fueled. Just about 2/3 of the way into the first loop and something wasn't feeling right. Sure, I already felt the knees – nothing new there. This was different. This was waves of dizziness that was coming and going and it was not going away. Bobby and I had enjoyed some back and forth time by now. We were happy to be near each other and psyched that the day was going so well.

After a long out and back, Bobby stopped to pee. A mile or so later, I decided to do the same thing – hoping that this might relieve the rest of my discomfort as well. Bobby passed me, I hopped on my bike, and the race was back on. But something didn't feel right. In fact, what ever relief I got from my little roadside stop only seemed to churn up something deeper. I Had to Go. As in 'number 2'. But the last thing I wanted to do was take time out of such a great ride for this. Knowing we were about to head into the big hilly section that heads towards Whiteface, I decided to try and make up some time before I made my next pit stop. Besides, maybe it would go away.

It didn't. And while there are a few Porta-Johns along the course... There wasn't one now. There was, however, a campground near the base of Whiteface Mountain. As I rode passed, I inquired with the spectators, cheering racers on as to whether there was a bathroom close by. They pointed to a building 50 yards from the road and as quick as I could, I weaved to the shoulder, left my bike, and ran for relief. 15 minutes of wishing I could get back on my bike until one of the kind spectators came back to check and see if I was all right. I said I was, tried to get up, and went right back down – where I stayed for the next 10 more minutes.

The only thing worse than the discomfort I was feeling was how thin the field of bikers was when I finally made it back onto the course. What was a Tour De France-like pack of racers, as far as I could see both ahead of and behind me, was now just a steady stream of scattered riders. Five more similar stops throughout the rest of ride not only added an hour and a half to my ride time, but also made it impossible for me to keep any solids or

fluids down. My nutritional plan was out the window and once again, the race had changed.

Towards the end of the second bike loop, I could feel the huge drain on my energy and in the glaring afternoon Sun, I knew my lack of fluid intake was going to be an even bigger problem. The next time I saw Bobby was at the beginning of the 14 mile Haselton “out and back” part of the ride – only he was finishing and I was just starting this leg. Keep pushing. Don’t stop. Because, even after 7 hours and 46 minutes of a painful ride and falling behind more than 500 people on the 112-mile course, I still had to figure out a way to run my first-ever Marathon.

Marathon. The notion of running 26.2 miles alone is maddening. It is a huge accomplishment and I’m always amazed – as a non-runner – how people do that. People said that I couldn’t attempt IronMan without first having a Marathon under my belt. I knew that my knees could not take the abuse more than once and that the only Marathon these legs would ever run would be if I were able to conquer the IronMan.

In the scorching heat of the blazing afternoon sun... Here we go! Getting off the bike and into the second transition was a huge relief. Bleeding, is usually a good indicator that you’ve been in a racing bike saddle for too long. By now, both knee braces are already on – 3 hours earlier than I suspected – so I just need to change my shoes, glop some Tiger Balm onto my already aching knees, tape up my shins so that my shin splints don’t turn into out right fractures on the course, and get going.

The first hundred yards is flat and exciting so I take off with an easy run pace just to try and get my legs moving. After any significant time on a bike, you’re legs – pumped with blood and lactic acid, feel like worthless bags of cement. Getting them moving, let alone running, is always a difficult challenge. This pace would help. Then the course takes a downhill pitch for the next ¾ mile and I walk. Between my knees and shins, downhills are my worst enemy. I can run up hills with relative ease. Passing even strong established runners, but running downhill – where most people really turn it on – will finish me off in short order. It also allows me to grab some ice water and some pretzels from the first aid station. With my stomach still reeling from the previous 7 hours, I decide to suck on some pretzels for their salt content and, try to begin to re-hydrate and lower my core temperature by chewing ice. It’s a strategy that winds up getting me through my entire first loop – passing up all offers of food and fruit for fear of repeating my morning’s performance.



About a mile past the first aid station, I see our support crew. 12 or more people crowded in and around a newly purchased Gazebo for shelter from both rain and sun and what would be rain again! Having been concerned by Bobby’s initial reports and sharing fears of me possible not making the bike cut-off, they are so happy to see me. Noise makers blaring, signs in hand, wearing new “Go Bobby Go



Ted” – IronFan shirts and high fives for an instant burst of strength, they are a welcome, if not emotional sight. It will be a while before I see them again.

Past the Olympic ski jumps heading out onto River Road, I see Bobby – once again, heading in the opposite direction as he starts to make his way up towards the end of his first loop. Mine is just getting started, but I am So excited for him that it changes my focus away from my problems to him. Knowing he had a great ride and knowing that he’s still dealing with that cut on his foot from the swim start. He looks great!



After 13.1 miles even the fumes I was running on were gone. Hearing the roar of the crowd surrounding the Olympic Center in the hot afternoon sun was bitter sweet. I knew, somehow, I’d make it there, but I knew it wouldn’t be soon.

If there was an easy place to quit, that was it. I made the left to head out of town and head into 13.1 miles of running that I had never experienced before. But I knew I wasn’t ready to throw in the towel. This was IronMan. I had dreamed too long and trained too hard to let that go at this point.

Seeing the crew this time was a bit more emotional. Bobby had apparently given them more feedback on my condition on his last pass back. They were scared for me. They knew I wasn’t about to try this again some other year and that I wasn’t emotionally ready for the prospect of failure. My Kelly was in tears as I passed by. They all started running with me but Kelly kept going. She was visibly upset when she said, “Daddy, just remember ‘The Little Engine That Could’”. “I think I can, I think I can.” She said to me as she made me promise not to quit. If that’s not motivation to persevere... What is?

Tears mixed with sweat as I held back my emotions and kept on chugging. At the next aid station, I took advantage of some warm chicken broth. Hoping that it would be mild enough to keep down and possibly add to my efforts to stave off total dehydration. It seemed to work and that got me to the next station where I sipped some more. Only now the sun was setting, the breeze was picking up, and the ice that had been providing such relief was now making me cold. On the way out on River Road with the light of dusk waning and the temperature dropping, I could feel parts of my feet hurting that I never knew could hurt. I had been reduced to a mixture of running and walking at this point, but I’m not sure which hurt more, so I kept changing it up, trying to run on the soft shoulders as much as possible to extend the life of my knees and keeping my promise to myself by running all of the up hills.

By the time I had reached the furthest turnaround before heading back towards Lake Placid, dusk had been replaced by night. The volunteer placed a glow stick (My best interpretation of this is the IronMan scarlet letter) around my neck as I headed out into the darkness and asked myself “What next?”

How ‘bout rain? The run back, in the dark, is quite a lonely experience. With no ambient light from surrounding metropolitan areas, the Adirondack night sky can get

mighty dark. With rain clouds coming in (yes, rain clouds), not even the stars can keep you company. Along the road back I passed more than a few people, some still standing, some actually on the ground and I found my self telling them to “keep going”, “you’re on the home stretch”, just as so many volunteers, spectators and other racers had been using to encourage me along.

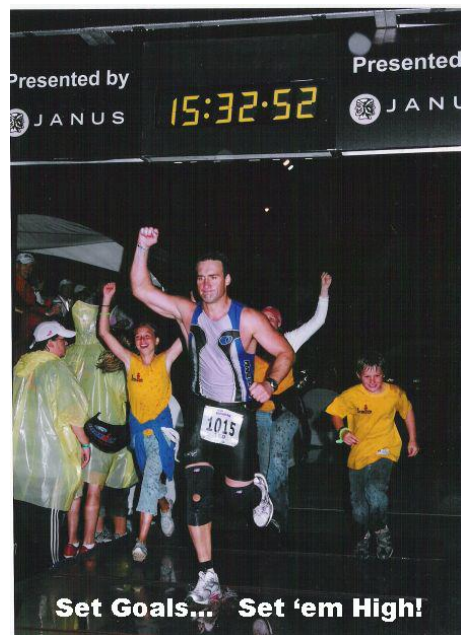
At first it was just a drizzle, but it quickly became a full-on rain. Temperatures had dropped almost 30 degrees and the day had come full circle. Dark and rainy – just like it started. As I approached the ski jumps for my last time, a volunteer was handing out Mylar emergency blankets. Not sure if I wanted it for heat retention or protection from the rain – it provided little of either.

My brain was a scattered ball of mush, held together only by my list. I had decided to create a list – an actual list that I carried with me – that would include 26 people (or groups of people) that I would spend each of the 26 miles thinking about to help the miles go by easier. Friends, relatives, teammates... People from all corners of my life that have been so encouraging to me along this journey. It was my way both to pay tribute to their generous support and remind me how many people were pushing and pulling for me to reach higher.



As this shivering shell of myself hobbled closer to town, the illuminating glow of the sky above the Olympic Center was accompanied by the growing roar of excitement and energy radiating from the finish line... My finish line. Nothing was going to stop me now. The family had joined me for my last charge up the final hill into town. Just a “quick” mile out and back before my final approach to the Oval.

Those two miles were ridiculously longer than any two miles I had ever run before. Half way out, I decided to walk about 50 yards just to make sure I could reach the finish line. In my mind it was that close. But as the lights and noise came back into view, the racers in front of me didn’t stand a chance. My pace accelerated as a lightness overcame me and I began passing the handful of people I could see. As I rounded the corner into the Oval, the roar of the crowd, the music, the announcer all faded as my family came into view. They started running along side of me and celebrated the most amazing finish line I have ever crossed. For all of the insanity and madness that is IronMan, as I crossed the finish line to the announcer proclaiming “Ted Curtin, You Are An IronMan!” it was all so perfectly clear.



The Greeter grabs me, puts a medal around my neck and is swiftly pushed aside by the two astute Medics that could tell this guy was in trouble. From sprinting finish, to lifeless – albeit joyful - puddle of man as they drag me to their medical tent just yards from the finish line and begin to administer the first of two bags of IV fluid I would need before I could even stand up. Shivering uncontrollably, they also focused a giant heat cannon at me to help raise my body temperature to acceptable human levels.



The surreal buzz and hazy bright white glow of the medical facility proved that at least my sense of humor was still in tact as I couldn't help but think to myself, "So this is the bright white light people with near death experiences talk about."

And an hour and a half later, I muster up the strength to hobble back to the finish line to see the last "official" racer cross at 16:59:12. Truly an IronMan.

So for those of you who have ever dreamed of doing something big... Something you're so uncertain about that you refrain from letting anyone else know... I say, "Go for it!" You have nothing to lose, everything in the world to gain, and the journey along the way is priceless.

I thank you for being a part of mine.

Ted

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