

Paul's Great Adventure and My Part of the Journey

Ok, maybe a relaxing weekend on the shores of Lake Okanagan shouldn't include the 2007 Ironman Canada event. I am, though, going to need a couple of days off to recover from this 25th Anniversary weekend. It seemed like a good thing to do. Now, please, don't misunderstand me, I did not participate as an athlete - that would have been too easy. I was there cheering on my good friend, Paul.

Now, Paul drove over to Penticton, B.C., the home of Ironman Canada, on Thursday so he would be fresh on Friday to check-in and pick-up his race items, attend the athlete meeting/banquet and start relaxing for Sunday's Ironman - 2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike ride and a full marathon, event.

Me, I kissed my wife, who was all snuggly at 5:30am on Friday morning, "goodbye", then jumped on my motorcycle and caught the 6:00 a.m. ferry from San Juan Island to America. I rode the scenic route up to Vancouver, B.C. then over Highway 3 to Penticton, arriving around 4:00 pm.

I attended the Athlete Banquet with Paul and 2,600 other very fit people. After dinner I listened to all the hype and talk about the history of Ironman Canada (IMC). How great IMC is, etc. Truth be known I am not a tri-athlete or a fan of triathlons, so a lot of what was being said was, well, boring to me. I left and went for a run, which ended about the same time as the athletes meeting - where the rules are explained and gone over. I am sure they went over such things as proper bike shorts colors, how not to draft while cycling, how to look good for the camera, how to wave to the crowds, how to puke in a dignified way, stuff like that.

After a brief stop at camp, yes, we were camping in a tent amongst the Land of Giant RV's because all the hotels, motels, condos, B&Bs and anything else with a bed and mattress had already been reserved a year before and had someone sleeping in them, we ended up downtown at a place called Peppers. Peppers had really great bartenders (Luke and Jason), plus a really nice and lively crowd. Paul and I discussed race strategies, transition times and techniques, and how badly we missed our families, leaving the place after 1:00 a.m. I did try to tell everyone that Paul was a member of the Brazilian National Triathlon Team. I suppose, since we didn't look Brazilian nor could speak Portuguese, we were not all that believable, though a dude named Monty was really disappointed when he found out the truth.

Saturday 6:00 a.m. we are up because Paul had things to do to get ready; like bike things, wet suit things - there were a whole lot of things to do. Our first stop was the local Starbucks for morning brew. We chatted with a visiting couple from Minneapolis, who were not here to compete but to register for next year's race. It

was at this moment that I learned of a tradition of Ironman Canada that really blew me away. One must be physically in Penticton to register for next year's race. This applies to this year's participants as well, except they can register on Saturday – one of those things Paul needed to do, non-participants register on Monday. I kid you not!! I have never heard of such a thing. Apparently the IMC haven't heard of active.com. No wonder the mayor of Penticton thanked the athlete the night before at the banquet and explained how IMC was staying in Penticton and how much Penticton loves the IMC.

My mind quickly went to the economics infusion to this town. What a golden goose this event is. Participants come from all over the world for this race, not just once to register but twice - the second being the actual event. Amazing. This explains why Jane and Phil, from back home on the island, were arriving sometime on that Saturday. Jane was here to register. I thought they just liked Paul.

After our morning brew, Paul dropped me off at our camp so he could go and get prepared, then check his bike and register for next year's race, plus take a nap – which I woke him up from – and other things a mere mortal, like me, wouldn't understand. I went for a really nice run along the canal that connects Okanagan Lake with Skaha Lake. After my run I met up with Jane and Phil and we went to IMC Command Center to hook-up with Paul. I walked through the Expo and found demo bikes on sale for \$4,999. Bicycles not motorcycles. I also saw bike shoes, running shoes, body glide (which I wasn't about to ask the use of), Gu gel, Gatorade and all sorts of apparel with IRONMAN printed somewhere on it. Even twenty seven styles of socks.

Dinner plans were made for 6:30 and we, Jane, Phil and I, were dismissed by the athlete so he could go and "chill". Apparently "chilling" didn't include his support group.

Jane, Phil and I decided to go and rent inter-tubes and float down the canal, which was a really good idea since the temperature was close to 500 degrees C outside, in the shade. No sooner did my butt hit the cold water that a cold front blew in, dropping the temperature to near freezing. You really have to love Canada, eh. We were committed to float down the canal and actually had fun, though my butt was frozen for the next two hours. We rode back to the parking lot with a bus full of young people singing the lyrics along with a loudly played "Summer of 69" by Bryan Adams. Canadians really love their rock stars, eh.

After the thaw we enjoyed dinner with Paul and then I experienced another late night at Peppers, this time it was Jane's fault. Late into the night I finally crawled into my cozy sleeping bag only to be awakened at 5:00 a.m. so we could "get a good spot" for the mass start of swimmers at 7:00 am. I didn't remember this from the promotional brochure.

I was told that this mass start would be “impressive” and that it is the biggest of its kind with close to 2,600 swimmers standing behind the starting line waiting to swim. And 10 billion people are standing on land watching. I was one of those 10 billion.



6:45 am. The start began for the “professionals” with them swimming away in a tight group. They were fast. I bet someone shouted “shark”.

7:00 am. A non-terrorist cannon boomed and the swimmers took off. This mass start reminded me of a school of spawning salmon all trying to reach that one unfertile egg. It was a sight to behold. I was impressed and in awe as all the swimmers began their 104.2 mile journey; similar to the salmon who return from the sea to fulfill their destiny, though the salmon soon die.

The other 15 billion people began to move and position themselves for the next stage of viewing. Supporters wearing printed T-shirts, some reminding me of missing children fliers, proclaiming their support for their spouse, lover, family member, friend, etc were wandering through the area. Both excitement and discarded coffee cups filled the areas as the swimmers swam and supporters supported.



Jane and Phil waded out into the water for a good look of where the swimmers emerge – which reminded me of our primordial ancestors leaving the water in search of food and coffee and a new home... land. I chose to watch from this home, not wanting to wear wet pants all day long. I would have my level of support questioned later in the day for that decision.

Our athlete, Paul, came out of the water at 8:08 am – 1:08 for his swim. I wondered where one goes, while swimming, to use the restroom in all that mass of people. I felt bad that I wasn't wearing a T-shirt with his picture, name and number along with "My Dorky Friend Is Faster Than Your Dorky Friend". That would have been very cool.

Spending only three minutes, Canadian, in transition from swim to bike, thanks to a couple of "strippers" (volunteers that "strip" off the swimmers wet suit). Not a bad job, I suppose. I watched Paul cruise out of the "Getting On The Bike" area and begin his 112 mile (US) bike ride. I took a lot of pictures of the ground as he rode by.

Jane, Phil and I went back to camp. With the time that we had to wait, Jane and I went for a two hour trial run along the west side of Shaka Lake. Phil stayed at camp, which we were now sharing, and worked on his tan. No sooner had we finished our run than we were off to Yellow Pass (without showers) to watch the riders climb and then descend their final 12 kilometers (Can) into town and their next transition area from bike to running.

Yellow Pass works like this; supporters lined the roadway and cheer on the riders. We arrived, found a place to park and walked about five hundred miles to where the riders cruise by, arriving an hour before Paul, and without chairs. We could have taken showers and a nap, but the walk would have cancelled out the showering experience. We watched as riders, who also needed showers, rode by smiling and waving to the crowds – losing, I am sure, precious minutes. In Canada one says "Good Work" instead of the US version, "Good Job". They, like US supporters, also say "almost there" when really they aren't. I would get confused and shout "Almost Work". I did say it with a Brazilian accent, just to keep people guessing.

Paul, finally, came flying by and I was happy to have spent an hour standing along this stretch of Iron Road, avoiding both bicycles and cars while shouting "Good Work" just to see him for a mere second. I do have another good picture of the pavement and Jane has a good picture of his butt. This is what supporters do – hurry, wait, take a picture of a blur and hurry to the next area, which is what we did next.

Driving back to Penticton was a lesson in two areas:

- (1) Patience - as we were stopped and goied in traffic for over an hour before actually driving a speed of over a snail's pace. This is due to the volunteers stopping traffic to allow bicyclist to pass through the intersection unharmed.
- (2) Letting an aggressive, competitive female driver drive. Jane thought that we should be allowed through because we were racing to the next stage, too. Enough said on this one.

We arrived at the finish line without any scars from a "negative car impact experience". There we waited, again, for Paul to arrive, which was another hour, but this time we had loud speakers with blaring music and an announcer who would call out each runners name, where they were from, how much they weighed, how many children they had, if any and how much they spent on their bikes. The crowd went nuts for each competitor. Got to love those Canadians, eh? On the other hand the announcer calls each competitor by name and then says "You are now an Ironman" with volume unheard of since the Grateful Dead concert in 1991. I moved to a side street where the revival was quieter.

Paul arrived ahead of schedule, thank God as I was about to go and string up the "You are now an Iron Man" announcer by his thumbs. Paul quickly, as much quick as he could muster, move through the finish line and become, again, an "Ironman". He finished his ordeal in 11 hours and 29 minutes; a personal best. 'Cause he had the best support crew ever, eh!

I was able to catch up with him not long after his finish. He was wearing a white hat, silver finisher's blanket and dark shorts. Just like the other 2,000 finishers in the area, who were milling around looking for that one egg. He had just crawled into the food station, saw me and limped over. He told me how much he loved me and how happy he was I was there. He also told me that Baby Jesus had run with him the last six miles. I figured he had suffered some type of brain damage and was tripping out in a very bad way - dude.

A nice volunteer lady, not a "stripper" escorted him to the medical tent for much needed attention. There, they discovered something I have been saying for years, that Paul didn't have a brain. I hope they could transplant a new one, with some sense, into his skull. I didn't see him again until the next morning before I headed for home. He asked me not to mention the Baby Jesus comment and I assured him his secret is safe with me.

As I reflect on this weekend I realize a couple of things:

- (1) IM doesn't stand for Ironman; it stands for Idiotman (or Woman). This whole thing is just nuts and expensive. I mean, I am really into running marathons, but this???? I don't get it.
- (2) Next time I travel to Penticton I will do the event, because being a supporter is hard work. Standing, walking, pushing, cheering, eating hot dogs, drinking cold coffee, staying up late into the night and waiting is very wearing on a person. I need a week to recover.
- (3) I was impressed with the level of commitment; both personal and financial to participate in this event. We can learn from that and practice this in those areas of our life that bring us meaning and pain.
- (4) I am at peace with the fact that I will never be an Ironman. The thing for me is I don't like to swim. My belief is this – if God had wanted us to swim we would have fins and had stayed in the water in the first place. Swimming doesn't work for me, that's why I run. I can live with that, but the IM tattoos are pretty cool – so cool it might make me reconsider.

