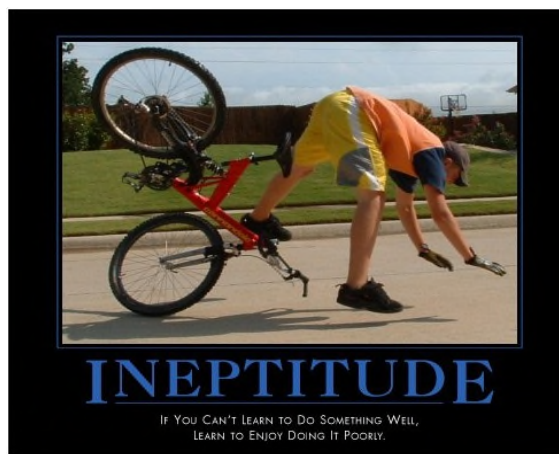




“...as dusk approached, I started wheezing out that lick, ‘I am Ironman,’ imagining what it would feel like to cross the finish line. I tried to get the syllables in sync with each painful step, but my parched lips stuck together, and it came out as ‘I am Moronman!’ Perhaps that was more fitting after all...”



by Krey Hampton

140.6
IRONMILES:

Swim 2.4 miles
Bike 112 miles
Run 26.2 miles

Vamosos!

Julie Moss, the *agony of defeat* icon, got passed at the last minute while literally crawling to the finish line of the 1982 Ironman triathlon in Hawaii. Fifteen years later – finding herself in her forties – she returned to Kona to give it another shot. What drove her to seek out more punishment?

“There's something so noble, so dignified about the Ironman competitor who carries on in the dark,” she told a reporter, “I want an experience like that, too.”

Frankly, she's nuts. I've been there now (both nuts and in the dark), and my account doesn't include any form of the words *nobility* or *dignity*. Here's how it went:

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Back when break-dancers in parachute pants were judged by the size of their ghetto blasters, I sat at home one day flipping channels between Saturday

morning cartoons and American Bandstand. A scrawny kid with a Midwest mullet, I was the *only* kid in my junior high school deprived of cable television; since the brand new phenomenon called MTV wasn't among my four channel choices, on most Saturdays the inevitable afternoon lineup of golf, game shows, bowling, and PBS telethons would finally convince me to shut off the TV and head outside. But this day would be different: The familiar bars of ABC's *Wide World of Sports* intervened, and the big old Zenith TV kept right on flickering. The Ironman was in the lineup, and the broadcast came complete with gratuitous replays of Ms. Moss' famous finish.

They say this particular footage can be used to divide mankind into two groups: Group 1 will see it as the ultimate test of endurance and will be convinced to try it for themselves. They'll use the footage as their motivation. Group 2 will be convinced that Group 1 is somewhere between masochistic and suicidal on the crazy scale. They'll use the footage as their justification.



Crawling to the finish line in Kona

### BIG IDEA

Apparently I spent some cocky teenage years as a member of Group 1, because on the next commercial break, I got out a piece of paper and started a list of things to do before I die:

*"#1. Finish an Ironman."*

That seemed easy enough, so I kept right on going, jotting down one tremendously optimistic goal after another. When the bucket list looked complete, I added a nuclear clause and taped it up on my wall. The nuclear clause, of course, exempted me from completing my list if Reagan and Gorbachev couldn't work out their differences and I ended up with radiation poisoning. Barring that, however, I fully intended to spend the rest of my life in pursuit of my new goals.

Well, the years went by, "The Day After" never came, and puberty brought new interests. A set of reshuffled priorities prevailed over my old list, which got stashed away between the pages of a soon-forgotten book. When I left home after high school, the book went into a box that eventually made its way up to the storage shelves in the attic of our barn – which could very well have doubled for one of those vast warehouses in an Indiana Jones movie set.

I headed to Southern California after college and eventually found myself working an uneventful engineering job that made me wonder how I could possibly be spending eight hours a day with my rear end parked in the same swivel seat. Real adulthood status hit me even harder when my parents first came to see me in my new place. After a quick hello, my dad went straight back out to the RV and started unloading a bunch of boxes he had run across in a

recent, empty-nester downsizing effort. As it turned out, their real motive in dropping by was not to see me, but to finally unload all of the junk I had left at home.

After they left, I got nostalgic going through boxes I hadn't seen in years. At some point during my reminiscing, I ran across my old list. I was excited to see it again, and I thought it might be fun to go through it and see how many goals I could check off. *Nope, nope, nope...* I stared at the check-less list, and the paper itself seemed to taunt me: *You're over a quarter of a century old and can't even cross a single life-goal off your list!*

Without giving my brain a chance to interject some common sense, my sub-ego came back with a premature reply: *No way! A quarter century is NOT old, and I still have plenty of time to get to every item on this list one by one. Watch this!* I glared at Goal #1 and decided right then and there that I'd be checking it off before my next birthday.

What I originally had in mind was the king-daddy race in Hawaii that I had seen on TV, but unfortunately in the meantime the Kona race had become so popular that only those who had previously qualified could even give it a shot. Sure, there was a lottery for novices like myself, but even those who won the coveted lottery spots had to validate their entry by completing another full-distance triathlon first. Now my goal was to do it once...and then never again. I started checking around online and, to my consolation, found an ironman-length qualifier race right there in California: the Vineman in Sonoma County's wine country. Sounded like a beautiful setting. Besides, a trip to the Bay Area would give me an excuse to see some old college friends from my days at Berkeley – ideal!

The race was just four months away, but I figured if I started training right away, I'd have plenty of time to get ready (note to wannabe Ironmen: take a year at a minimum... two if you work a desk job). I was psyched when my entry form came in the mail, and I started filling it out right away. Though you don't have to officially qualify for the qualifiers, you still have to guess at your finish time on the entry form; I made what I now know to be a very overconfident estimate (not a good idea, as it turns out), wrote out a check, and dropped the packet in the mail. Being financially challenged, I felt a bit like someone posting bail; in other words, I was taking enough of a hit coughing up the stiff registration fee to guarantee that I'd at least show up on race day.



Vineman Triathlon in picturesque Napa Valley

### SPRING TRAINING

I only lived a few miles from the coast, so I started biking to work and hitting the beach on the way home for ocean swims and boardwalk runs. I had been looking for some sort of challenge to break up my day, and this sort of so-called training in SoCal certainly seemed like an optimal way to get my sorry butt into shape. The first hitch, however, came when my road bike got stolen. I had locked it to a signpost, but someone had pulled the sign clear out of the ground to get to the bike. Downhearted, I switched to my mountain bike. It really slowed me down, but as a positive spin, I figured my newfound “resistance training” might actually help increase my stamina.

Another hitch came up slowly over the next couple of weeks as I found myself up against a deadline at work. I started staying at the office later and later until pretty soon it was getting dark before I left. A couple of freaky encounters with seaweed during night swims in the ocean convinced me to switch venues to my subdivision’s tiny pool. It seemed easy enough – probably because the pool was so small that kicking off the wall would get you clear to the other side without much effort. I tried going in circles, but that made me dizzy, so I went back to regular laps. I measured the pool and figured out that it would take four hundred or so laps to test my endurance for the full 2 ½ miles of the race...never happened.

After a few months of phony spring training, a further hitch came with a job transfer to Phoenix.

Arizona’s brutal summer had hit in the meantime, which meant no biking during daylight hours unless you’re into heatstroke. Luckily, I found a health club near my office that was offering a free trial membership that would cover me all the way through race day. Training in air-conditioned comfort seemed too good to be true...and it was: My final weeks of training consisted of running on a treadmill, biking on a stationary bike, and swimming laps in another miniature lap pool. It should have been obvious to me, but I was about to find out the hard way that this kind of simulated, lunch-break training doesn’t quite cut it on the day of reckoning.

I booked my flight with a few weeks to go; the airline wanted an extra \$50 to check my bike as luggage, so I started calling friends in Berkeley to see if somebody could lend me one for a day. After a couple of dead ends, I finally found a friend with an old racing bike, so I made arrangements for the pickup. It’s ridiculous now that I think about it, but if the airline rep hadn’t told me about the extra charge for the bike at that point, I would have brought along a mountain bike for the race and would (presumably) have gone the whole 112 miles on knobby tires. Absurd!

As race day approached I started feeling the butterflies. I hadn’t set a time goal for myself, but I did have some additional, self-imposed race criteria: I wanted to swim the swim, bike the bike, and run the run. That may sound obvious, but there’s actually a true story about a guy who stayed in the shallows and walked the whole swim leg of the 1980 Ironman. Others have pushed their bikes up every incline or walked the entire marathon. I’ll bet even my grandma could finish an ironman-length race if you gave her enough rests; so as my secondary goals, I vowed not to touch the ground or hang onto buoys during the swim, dismount during the bike leg, or walk a single step during the marathon.

Initially I had been completely confident that – whether or not I met each of my goals – I’d somehow manage to finish the beast. But as crunch-time neared and training time ran out, I realized I hadn’t tested myself over the full distance of any of the three events. I started wondering if I’d be able to hack a single one of the legs, let alone all three on the same day; it was too late to compensate with long training sessions, though, since this late in the game I’d just wear myself out for the race. I spent the last few days before the race bouncing back and forth between mild fear and complete panic.





Blissful ignorance in the staging area

## RACE DAY

I flew into Oakland the night before the race; my friend Michael – having embarked on a more lucrative post-collegiate career than I – picked me up from the airport in his brand new BMW. We made a quick stop to grab the loaner bike, which didn't quite fit into his trunk. I hadn't considered the need for a bike rack, and the fact that I hadn't thought this whole thing through became pointedly obvious as I ran around looking to borrow some twine to jerry-rig a solution to my oversight. I then found myself crouched behind the car in a vain attempt to make the scratches in the paint job a bit less conspicuous by rubbing in some dirt. Needless to say, my spirit was sinking fast as we pulled up to Michael's place.

I had been planning to shave my head for the race anyway, so to instill a little false confidence I got out my razor and gave myself a full-on Bic-shave with a Mohawk. Turned out when I looked in the mirror, though, I didn't feel any badder – just balder.

I set Michael's alarm clock and, too late for any regrets, crashed on his couch. I didn't sleep well – if at all – knowing that a full day of certain torture lay just ahead...plus I didn't trust the borrowed alarm clock; I kept having flashbacks to that Seinfeld episode where the marathon runner oversleeps because Jerry's alarm clock doesn't go off.

With these fears haunting me, I was already wide awake when 4:30 a.m. hit and it was time to start rolling. The course was about an hour's drive away; I borrowed the Bimmer and headed out alone on the road. As the miles passed, I became fixated on the speedometer and odometer, realizing that I was

going to have to cover more miles with my own legs and the human-powered vehicle strapped into the trunk than the Bimmer could cover in a whole hour at top speed. Trying to focus on a different set of lights on the dashboard, I turned up the stereo.

As I neared my destination with the bass thumping in my borrowed ride, I began to feel the adrenaline pumping, and I actually was starting to feel a little badder! I started seeing bikes out on the road with the first glimpses of daylight; it hit me that race day really was finally here, and I was stoked to kick some butt. It wasn't long, though, before I realized that I was still miles from the starting line, and these guys were out taking warm-up laps – cruising around at highway speeds on bikes that cost more than the combined value of all my earthly possessions. So it wasn't long until I lost all my badness once again.

I pulled up to the staging area, found some parking, and mechanically went through the check-in process. I was pretty much the only one doing a race-day check-in; most everyone else had been in town the day before to register, preview the course, work out all the logistics of the transfers, and pack in a carb-loaded spaghetti dinner. I had read about all the pre-race activities in the registration packet, but without any vacation days saved up at work, I never really considered showing up early. Now I wished for a familiar face – a veteran to sit down with and drill for advice or a fellow first-timer to show me I wasn't alone. But with the starting gun just an hour away, it was too late for small talk. They handed me my packet, and I got my number written right on my shoulder in waterproof marker just like those guys on TV in Kona...but I sure didn't feel like one of those guys on TV in Kona.

I packed my running gear into a bag full of logos and walked my bike out to the racks – then spent far too much time among the hundreds of bikes trying to figure out where to strategically stash mine so that I could find it again quickly when the swim was done. That last hour was probably the shortest hour of my life. It was total *ground rush*, which is what skydivers go through for a few seconds before touchdown. Though you're not going any faster toward the end, at the last minute the ground seems to rush up like it's going to smack you hard. A couple of times in life I've faced milestones (my wedding day, for instance) where the sheer magnitude of the approaching event made it feel like it was accelerating toward me. Well this was one of those times, and I was about to get smacked.



### LEG #1: 2.4-MILE SWIM

(a mile and a quarter up the Russian River and back downstream to the staging area)

Everyone was assigned to a wave for the start of the swim. I don't know how they split up the waves, but I'm guessing it had to do with the estimated finish times on the registration form. If that's the case, I must have really underestimated my time on the registration form, because I somehow ended up in the first wave.

By the time I found a spot for my bike, I only had about thirty seconds to stretch before they called my wave down to the water. So, just like that, it was time to strip down and size up the competition. The guy standing next to me actually looked like the muscle and ligament dude in one of those anatomy pictures, only painted a skin color. As I packed my clothes into my sports bag there was no way to hide the fact that I was going to have more swimsuit and more body fat than any other man in the competition (and most of the women, too). Mr. Anatomy gave my baggy suit a strange look.

"My girlfriend threatened to dump me if I bought a Speedo," I said apologetically.

The fitness poster boy didn't crack the slightest smile but went right back to his stretching and flexing. Apparently I wasn't taking this thing seriously enough.

As I looked at the athletic caliber around me, my casual training suddenly seemed overwhelmingly inadequate. The feeling of ill preparation was like that dream where you show up for class and the teacher hands out a test everyone else knew about. Plus you're wearing nothing but a jockstrap...Somewhere in the field there must have been some other *iron*

*virgins* as we're known, but to me everyone else seemed to know exactly what they were doing.

Just an hour before I had been shouting out Ozzy's classic *Ironman* riff in the car to get me stoked, but now it was more like "I am Virginman," with cheesy John Tesh music backing me up (yes, John Tesh actually has an *Ironman* album, too.) Rounding off the list of groups with an *Ironman* album is Ghostface Killah, whose lyrics start out with "What you doin' on our turf, punk?" followed by a bunch of obscenities. The gangsta rap version certainly fit the situation more closely. The sneers of the players around me seemed to be telling me to take my John Tesh CD and get off their turf while I still had a chance to walk away.

The forecast called for warm weather later in the day, but you wouldn't have known it from the chill before sunrise. I envied the guys with enough foresight to show up in a wetsuit. When you walk down to a river on a foggy morning, shivering uncontrollably while wearing nothing but your shorts, stepping into the black water is about the last thing you'd want to do. I stared at the shoreline and hesitated for a second before I realized all the good (i.e., shallow) spots were disappearing fast.

There was nothing to do at that point but to walk right in, stake my claim on a piece of the river, and make a warm spot to tread water in until the starting gun. The other competitors were starting to cheer in anticipation of the starting gun. When my feet left solid ground and I found myself in over my head, a contagious boost of adrenaline kicked in; I don't know if it was the chill in the water or just the palpable intensity of the moment, but the whole horde in the water let out a good yell that could have saved the Alamo or sent the walls of Jericho a-tumblin' down. I've never been one to raise my fist to a speech or cheer raucously with a crowd, but here was one time I got into it – hoopin' and hollerin' like I was a freaking cowboy in a landrush.

The gun went off, and I saw nothing but Speedos and elbows while I gasped and swallowed gulps of water. I caught a couple of heels off my chin and thought about stopping to let everyone pass, but they'd have just gone right over the top of me.

"It's only a race," I told myself. But people have actually died in this leg of the Vineman...like really dead: deceased, extinct, cadaverous, liquidated, departed forever! From what I've read, it usually starts with a panic attack set off by getting elbowed, and then you get pushed under, never to surface again

until the scuba divers pull you out and stuff you into a body bag. Only a race? This literally felt like a life-or-death struggle for survival!

Well, I was in no way ready to meet my maker, especially if I'd have to explain how a pre-teen stupor of thought had led to this suicidal situation, so I swam over to the side as close to the buoys as I could manage. At one point I actually scraped my hands on the riverbed and realized just how shallow the water was – maybe I wouldn't drown after all! As I looked around to gain my bearings, I realized that a few others had succumbed to the relief offered by solid ground – they were actually walking this stretch! No way was I going to give up on my goals this early in the race, so I kept right on plowing through the shallow water facedown.

Unfortunately during my surveillance I had also spotted some cows along the river banks, which got me thinking about what I knew of the local hydrology from my engineering classes. With dams along the river blocking the flow, the water I was swallowing – thanks to an ongoing drought in the region that had led to historically low river levels – had now been stagnating for quite some time. How many cow pies had been dropped into this reach of the river with nowhere to go? And, with heavy pesticide use in the contributing watershed, what sort of agricultural brew might be forming in this sink? Was that really fog coming off the water or something more malignant? Perhaps the walkers had the right idea after all!

The race frenzy had begun to die down by this time – not because people were getting nicer, but because I had gradually dropped to the back of the pack. I was a little bummed about falling back so soon, but at least the calm water allowed me to get into a good, slow rhythm with my strokes. It wasn't long before I noticed people swimming the wrong way – they were already on their way back from the turnaround that marked the halfway point. And I wasn't even half way to the halfway point!

I picked up the pace until I came to a low trestle crossing the river. It was covered with a mat, and you had to get out and walk a few steps to get over it. Apparently I had forgotten how to support myself on two legs – a bad omen given that functioning legs would be crucially vital to the rest of my day. I had to focus on the present, though, and I slowly got back into my hydro-groove.

Every once in a while there would be a rush of turbulence, and I realized it was the later heats

passing me by. By the time I hit the turnaround, there weren't many swimmers behind me anymore, and I briefly forgot I was racing. When I hit the trestle the second time, I stayed on my hands and knees and just flopped back into the water on my side. I wondered how long it would take me to float downstream if I just passed out right then and there, but the so-called current was too slow to be of any help at all.

On the home stretch, I aimed for the spot of green that marked the Astroturf mat they had laid out in the water. I wasn't sure how close I'd have to get to be able to stand, so I just swam right up it until I was basically lying on it. I was finally on solid ground, but my arms were shot. Out of sheer adrenaline, I had been doing the crawl stroke the whole way. In training, I had never gone more than a few hundred yards before switching to a wimpier breaststroke or even the backstroke. I guess I hadn't considered that there's no way to swim backstroke in a race setting, since you'll wail on the people next to you and probably end up getting shoved under the water by some dude with no body hair. Plus without the luxury of lane markers, you'd end up running yourself right into a logjam.

My arms were completely numb, and they gave out when I tried to prop myself up. My face hit the water and then the mat just a few inches deeper. I was a bit disoriented when I finally stood up and stumbled toward the bikes like a drunk fish out of water. The race photographer started snapping photos and caught me in an awkward pose. I could just imagine the next day's newspaper showing a picture of the winner: "Vineman!" Then next to it you'd see my picture with its own caption: "Wineman!"

All embarrassment aside, though, I found some consolation in the fact that I had licked one full leg of this beast; somehow I had managed to come out relatively unscathed. One down, two to go!



Fish out of water





LEG #2: 112-MILE BIKE  
(double 56-mile loop through Sonoma's vineyards)

I looked at the bike rack and realized that my conspicuous bike-stash strategy had been a complete waste of time. Either way, that bike would have been plenty conspicuous regardless of where I had stashed it, since it was about the only one left in the racks.

I pulled my padded biker shorts over my swim trunks, put on a T-shirt, and sat down to lace up my running shoes – that was the extent of my costume change. My arms were shaking, and it took three or four attempts just to get my shoes tied. I doubt there was anyone else on the bike course with running shoes on, since everyone else had those shoes with half a pedal built right into them. My bike did have toe straps, but I was about to regret that little accessory.

My legs were likewise a little shaky when I stood up, so I figured I'd strap in my right foot first, then push off and cinch up the other strap. Brilliant plan! With my right foot strapped in nice and tight, I pushed off with my left foot. As the bike fell to the right, my left foot started flailing around in a futile effort to block the fall. Though it couldn't have taken more than a second, the actual fall to the pavement seemed like a very long, drawn-out, agony-of-defeat type sequence right up there with Vinko the Skier (remember that guy who took a spill before he even got to the end of the ski jump?)

Luckily most of the spectators had moved on to watch the real competition already miles ahead of me, and the photographer had missed his chance to grab another definitive Wineman shot. I picked my slightly bloodied self up and tried again, this time with enough speed to strap in safely (and with a little

slack in the straps). I've heard the cliché about how you never forget how to ride a bike. Not true! For the first few miles, I felt like I was a four-year old taking my first ride without training wheels. I did eventually manage to get into a good rhythm, but my pace was pitiful. Adrenaline can only keep you going for so long, and I was all out.

I tried not to think about the distance ahead of me, but a makeshift sign reminded me that I had 110 miles to go. That's a couple of hours in the car doing 55! That's the distance from New York to Philly! That's far enough to trace on a globe! If you were sitting out in space, you could easily make out that distance with the naked eye. Come to think of it, if you went 110 miles straight up, you literally would be out in space. So I was about to bike the equivalent distance between myself and a satellite in low orbit...I was obviously doing a very poor job of keeping my mind off the distance, but these random thoughts at least kept my brain off the pain, and the mile markers started passing by with each little mind game that I played.

Occasionally I'd pass someone patching up a tire, so I knew I still wasn't quite in last place. We stragglers were spread out just enough, though, that I briefly forgot I was racing and let my pace drop to – were it possible – even more of a crawl.

It was that perfect time of day where the sun is just starting to peek out and the temperature is ideal for biking. I was actually starting to enjoy the solitude – listening to the birds and taking in the wine country scenery. I wanted to stop, pick some grapes, and take a nap under the nearest shady tree... Then *whoosh!* An übermensch still in his Speedo went flying right past me. Reality check! I couldn't believe I was getting lapped already. I couldn't believe people actually bike over a hundred miles in a Speedo! Time to pick up the pace.

The superbikers kept coming. Though drafting is technically against the rules, I made a few lame attempts to keep up with them. Not a chance! I'd have to settle for the brief exhilaration of that rush of air cooling me down. With about forty miles behind me, I hit *Death Hill*. Actually, I can't remember what everyone was calling the endless incline, but the name certainly had something to do with morbidity. I popped the bike into the lowest gear and just wished for it to end. My legs were burning by the time I reached the top. I was relieved to have it behind me until I remembered I'd be doing it again in another fifty miles.



Leading the pack [actually, the bikers “behind” me are over 50 miles ahead of me]

As I neared the end of the first loop around the course, I saw a race worker frantically flailing his arms around.

“First lappers, head right,” the traffic director shouted, “Everyone else, go left!”

Just about everyone was veering left toward the staging area. I envied them all for being done, particularly because they wouldn’t have to face that hill again. He pointed me to the right, but I almost ran him over as I debated my options. Luckily you couldn’t see the finish line from the split-off point; otherwise, I might have been tempted to just end the pain right then and there by joining the lefty crowd.

I headed back out on the course by myself; it was like a scene out of the final judgment, and I was getting the apocalyptic boot. If the Hindus are right, I think I caught a brief glimpse of how those who screwed things up in this life will feel upon their death – watching the moksha crowd wrap things up with a party while you get sent right back out to do it all over again. “Sorry, nice try, but you’ll have to give it another shot... and another, and another, and another, until you get it right...”

My neck hurt so badly that I could only look down at the pavement, which – with the afternoon sun now at its hottest – seemed to be cooking me while I was skewered to my bike. No matter your background, this was hell all right.

Rather than plot the shortest course, I started dodging the blazing sun by aiming for shady spots under trees along alternating sides of the road. More than anything, I just wanted to stop. Except water...I wanted water more than I wanted to stop. I had underestimated the water supply I’d need, and having long since run out, the only thing that kept me going was knowing that somewhere up ahead lay an aid station where I could get more. If I stopped I’d never get there.

I remembered hearing a bible story as a kid about some fool who traded his birthright for a Big Mac. I was getting to the point where I would have sold my soul for a seltzer; I was starting to understand Esau’s choice when I finally crested a hill and saw an aid station on the horizon.

I grabbed some water and stuffed a bunch of snacks into my supply bag. I felt like I had recharged with the stop. I was starting a pretty long downhill stretch, and things were just starting to look up again when *wham!* I just about went over the handlebars as the bike skidded to a stop. Apparently I had tweaked the shifter too far when I put it into high gear for the coast, and the chain had jammed up against the wheel. I was afraid my day was over, but I managed to pull the chain out and get going again.

My pit stop could have been much worse, because I really wasn’t prepared for any mechanical problems. I had one small patch kit in my bag of tricks, but no extra tubes and no tools to even take off the tire. A broken chain would have meant certain *DNF*, which was my new word of the day.

Earlier that morning I had caught fragments of conversations about “*DNF*’ing.” Given my circuitous course up the hills, *f’ing* was becoming a regular part of the slanderous abuse coming my way that day from passing bikers, but *DNF*’ing I couldn’t make any sense of. Veteran triathletes use it as noun, verb, adjective, and everything in between, so it can be a confusing term. Someone finally explained to me that when the race results are published, everyone who “Did Not Finish,” gets a big “*DNF*” label in the official results. They don’t distinguish between those who barely miss the time cutoff and those who end up dropping out somewhere along the way out of physical, mechanical, or emotional reasons. In the



chatter of the passing veterans, the three scarlet letters seemed to mark a fate worse than death. After my close brush, I was starting to fear it now, too.

Despite my slow pace, I was increasingly finding myself out of the saddle – not because I was trying to push it, but because my butt hurt so badly that I couldn't sit anymore. Seats on stationary bikes have about three times the surface area of a racing bike seat, so my butt got spoiled in training. I tried to kill some time by figuring out random tidbits, like how much pressure was coming from that bike seat. From the feel of things, my weight was probably spread out over about two square inches, so I was putting about 100 psi on that seat. Action-reaction tells me that the seat is pushing up just as hard. I remember the first time my high school physics teacher told us that – according to Newton – our chairs were pushing up on us just as hard as we were pushing down. We all thought he was crazy, but if he had set us all on racing bike seats for the length of the lecture, I imagine we would have gotten the point.

We had this pneumatic jack in one of my college engineering classes that would have been perfect for further illustrating this principle. We used to use the jack as a ram to push over walls and measure the forces involved. I imagined setting up an experiment to model what I was going through: You attach a petrified banana to the contraption, put yourself between the wall and the machine, bend over, and start turning it up. When it gets up to 100 psi, you leave it there for six or eight hours. That's essentially what I was doing to myself here. Voluntarily! I must have been nuts.

I was cracking myself up with this picture of being violated by a pneumatic jack when I got to the base of the hill that had just about killed me the first time around. I saw a couple of people walking their bikes, but I was determined to ride the whole way, even if I had to zigzag up the hill more slowly than the walkers, dodging cars as I went. It was too

depressing to look at the top of the hill, so I looked down and started counting pedal strokes. I just counted to ten over and over. Each time, I pretended I only had to get to ten and then I'd be done. It was a cruel mind game to play with my body, but it was getting me up the hill nonetheless.

About halfway to the top, I started feeling a pop in my left knee with each pedal stroke. I had injured my knee during a hike about a year before (we got caught in a lightning storm near the summit, and I totally ate it during the mad sprint down the mountain). It hadn't bothered me during training, but now my body was starting to precipitate all the hidden secrets of past injuries. It took everything I had left – and then some – to finally struggle up to the top of the hill.

I thought my knee would start feeling a little better when the grade flattened out, but it actually kept getting worse. I was grateful for the toe straps, because I ended up being able to use them to let the good leg pull the other leg around in circles. I'm sure my problem was related to my previous injury, but I think it also comes back to some basic training advice for novices: Train on a bike that matches your racing bike, since your knees need to be used to the exact setting of the bike before attempting anything approaching the magnitude of this race.

My pace really dropped off after that, and the last few miles seemed to drag on forever. I was going on eight hours for the bike leg alone – that's like an entire nine to five workday spent on a bike seat! Once I passed the split-off point again I started looking for any sign of the staging area that would mark a brief reprieve from the torture. When I finally spotted it, I felt like an out-of-gas pilot who first glimpses the lights of a landing strip. Later on I ran across a photo sequence of a shattered warbird sputtering in for a landing with one landing gear out of commission. It seemed like a fitting analogy to the one-legged end of my bike race:



Sputtering in for a landing: B-17 Crash Sequence



### LEG #3: 26.2-MILE RUN

(out and back twice to a turnaround point 6.5 miles away in the rural hills)

The pros have to spend a few minutes switching shoes when they finish the bike leg. Well, I was already wearing my running gear, so here was a chance to actually make up some time! As I slowed down to park the bike, I had to remind myself to loosen the toe straps around my running shoes. A fall at this point would have been the end of me, but even just the slight motion of leaning over to loosen the straps sent jolts of pain through my knee; unfortunately, I was getting a preview of the rest of my evening

I got off the bike to set it in the rack, but I couldn't put any weight on my bad knee. I sat down on a curb to tighten my shoelaces and tried to think of something I would rather do less than run a marathon. I couldn't come up with anything. I went through the list of things Weird Al would rather do in his song *One More Minute*: slow, self-inflicted paper cuts; diving into a pool full of double-edged razor blades; licking out all the toilet bowls in Grand Central Station... Sure enough, each sounded more appealing to me than standing up and running a marathon.

I started into a slow jog and hoped that maybe my knee just needed some time and a good consistent pace to work out the trouble. Not a chance! Again, I tried not to think of the distance ahead of me, and again, I did an incredibly poor job of it. I had run 10K races in the past, and each time I had sworn I'd never run another race as long as I lived. Yet here I was setting off on not one, but four 10K races in a row...plus a couple of extra kilometers at the end just in case the four 10K's hadn't completely done me in. And to top it off I was nearly dead before I had taken a single step...What was I thinking?

As I left town and headed into the hills, I could hear cheers behind me. Though I didn't want to think about it, I knew that I had just spent longer on the bike alone than some people take to do an entire Ironman.

With a few miles behind me, I came to an aid station. When you think of an aid station during a race, you might picture volunteer workers running a few steps alongside the competitors to reduce spillage and smooth the handoff as the runners zip past. As I approached, an eight-year old helper saw me, grabbed some fruit, and started running with me in anticipation of the handoff. She ran right past me and had to turn around. I wasn't zipping past anyone.

"Water!" I heard someone yell; I reached out and gulped down a paper cup full of water. Only a few measly drops made it past my parched lips.

"Banana!" I grabbed a halved banana, tried clumsily to peel it while stumbling along, and – having been unsuccessful – ended up squeezing it into my mouth like an animal.

"Gel!" Still trying to keep moving, I grabbed a packet from the volunteer. I wasn't having much luck with the food, but with my knee in complete pain, some gel actually sounded perfect. I opened it, and – thinking it was some sort of soothing sports crème – rubbed it in all over my knee. Boy was it sticky. Boy was I stupid.

It turned out to be *Power Gel*, which is basically a liquid candy bar. It gradually hardened around the sweat on my leg, and I must say the pain, though fierce, wasn't quite strong enough to overcome the discomfort of sticky leg hairs. If only I had shaved my legs like the real athletes... If only I hadn't become delirious in the meantime... If only I were running fast enough to have been out of view of the now hysterical aid workers before my faux pas.

At the next aid station I grabbed two water bottles: one to drink and one to rinse off my knee. It didn't help much, but I was far too miserable to stay embarrassed for long. Later on as I recounted this story to a cousin of mine – who apparently suffers from the same genetic disorders as I do – I found out that it could have been much worse. She actually reversed the situation and ate the sports crème during a race, mistaking it for PowerGel! I guess I'd rather run with a sticky knee than spit out Dicocoyl Pentaerythryl and other enigmatic ingredients for twenty-six miles.

As I struggled over the hills with my sticky stride, gravity began to tag-team with a late afternoon



breeze. It was nature's joint fight against every step I tried to take.

"Against the wind,"

I started singing in my head every time I rounded the top of a hill and faced the full force of the wind. My consolation was that I'd at least have the wind at my back for the return trip – or so I thought. Miraculously (as in the plague kind of miracle...), the wind

actually changed direction right along with me at the turnaround point.

"I'm still running against the wind..."

I've always had an annoying tendency to get songs stuck in my head with the rhythm of the pace when I'm out on long runs and have too much time to think. Trying to replace one repetitive eighties tune with another, I started into the chorus:

"Ain't nothin' gonna break-a-my stride... nobody gonna slow me down... Oh no, oh no, I've got to keep on moving!"

Trying to remember the verse, I started singing – or rather grunting – out loud: "The road is rocky, you're feeling cocky, is that the reason why you're rrrunnin' so fast?" I rolled my "r" like Matthew Wilder in the original song and broke back into the chorus. My stride was certainly broken, so I tried changing it up a bit.

"Ain't nothin' gonna break-a-my pride..."

Except this...this race had definitely broken my pride right along with my stride, and, despite the lyrics, I wasn't feeling cocky in the least. Any remaining shred of dignity had long since disintegrated in the disfigured expression of pain on my face. My grimaced, contorted lips joined every other muscle in my body in an attempt to bail out my legs by pulling one in front of the other.

Gritting my teeth got every bone drafted into the battle as well, and somehow this joint effort got me back toward the finish line. It wasn't my finish line, of course, but I had to pretend I was on the home stretch just to keep myself going.

Though the fittest athletes had already finished, there were still plenty of people around me who were wrapping up their second loop, so at least I had some company. I started hearing the cheers from over a mile away. As I got closer, I saw that the finish

line was just a few hundred yards past the turnaround point. Who would know if I just ran to the finish without heading out again? Sure, these guys with their electronic tickers might suspect something fishy when they realized I had clocked twenty sub-four-minute miles back to back. But I didn't know a soul there, and even if they did disqualify me, no one I knew would ever find out... My mind was playing games with me, but ego and its evil twin, stupidity, overcame and I headed back out, practically alone.

Behind me now, I kept hearing the cheers, realizing that the pain was over for everyone else. I cursed the race organizers for the double loop, which could only have been a deliberate act of torture on the part of the race organizers – aimed, of course, directly at me and the other stragglers. A few hours earlier I had thought there was nothing I would have rather done less than to head out on the road after the painful bike ride. I had been wrong; heading out a second time after watching people finish was much, much worse.

I needed to draw on strength I didn't have, so I thought about a documentary I had recently seen about the Bataan death march. I pictured myself as a POW surrounded by guards who would bayonet me if I stopped my march. I've always wondered if I could survive something like that – well here was my chance to test myself. That thought got me going for a few minutes, but pretty soon I was back to feeling like I couldn't take another step.

I thought about my pioneer ancestors, stranded for the winter half-way through their thousand-mile walk across the plains. I pictured myself in the relief party, running to save them. I tried imagining any scene that might add some incentive to keep going. If I couldn't do it for myself, could I do it for others? This added perspective – mixed with a little coercion – helped me manage to dig deeply enough into my soul to shrink my own problem and keep me going just a little further.

I was pretty much alone for the rest of the race, since there were few enough of us left out on the road that the rolling hills blocked my view of any other runners. Some people say endurance races get you closer to God; well, the combination of pain and solitude definitely had me praying out there. I only needed forty lousy kilometers! As I recalled from Sunday school, Moses dragged the Israelites around the wilderness for forty years. I only needed to make it through a day, but I knew it was going to require some divine intervention, so I started making deals



with God. If he'd just get me through this, I'd never, ever get upset with anyone again; I'd spend the rest of my life doing charity work; I'd give away everything I owned and live on locusts and wild honey.

I thought of the Bible story where Jesus spent forty days wandering around alone in the desert without any food. Well that might be pushing it a bit. How about twenty days, four PowerBars, and a canteen? I didn't sense any divine approval of my barter. "No? OK, fine," I said to myself, "I'll take on the full forty." Then I remembered that Jesus' reward at the end of his walkabout was seeing the devil himself...I might have to draw the line there. "Oh what the hell," I found myself saying a few deranged steps later, "I'll deal with the devil, too. Just get me through this race!"

I tried shuffling the jukebox in my head to help distract me from the pain. Peter, Paul and Mary seemed to fit my Biblical theme, and their tune "500 Miles" sure seemed appropriate for the moment; I tried to replace it with the more upbeat version by the Proclaimers, huffing out, "I would walk five hundred miles" over and over again – one syllable for each step – but that soon gave way to the drawn-out, lamenting folk tune that unfortunately shares the same title. "Lord I'm one, Lord I'm two, Lord I'm three..." and so on. The numbered mileposts kept stacking up in my head all the way to infinity and whatever lies beyond; I was seriously considering just quitting right then and there, but like a broken record, I got stuck on the lyrics, "Lord I can't go a-home this a-way."

I needed something a bit less depressing if I was going to avoid going a-home a-failure. So I cast that song 500 miles away and tried giving something more sinister a chance: Black Sabbath! I started wheezing out that lick "I am Ironman," imagining what it would feel like to cross the finish line. Again, I tried to get the syllables in sync with each painful step, but my parched lips stuck together, and it came out as "I am Moronman!" Perhaps that was more fitting after all.

I tried to convince myself that the pain I was feeling was nothing more than neurons in my head. I kept messing with the lyrics for more distraction: "Die, damn neuron, man! da da da da da, da da da da..." From there it turned into anything that rhymed, from "I'm a Mormon, man" to "I can iron, man."

I was cracking myself up again with these Weirdalian parodies, but this time it hurt too badly to laugh. Since I was on the topic of irons, I started wondering if having a hot iron pressed against my ear

would be preferable to the pain I was in. I seriously couldn't decide. On a weirder tangent, I was fascinated by the realization that if you say *iron* really slowly, it almost sounds like *I run*, which was precisely what I was doing right then. How ironic, or rather homonymic... Or is that oxymoronic? Or just plain moronic? I had officially lost my mind. How hard would I have to get hit by an iron for it to knock me out completely and put an end to the misery?

Time to do some math for more attempts at pain distraction. The previous night I had taken my clueless guess at a completion time, added an hour or two as a buffer, and scheduled a late dinner with Michael and some old friends in Berkeley. Gauging by my last split time, estimated time elapsed, and distance remaining, I figured out that I would have to run 45 miles per hour for the remaining 8 miles to make it for dinner. Even though I had told myself I wouldn't stop for anything, I didn't want them waiting for me all night, so when I spotted a cheering family outside their house (these were pity cheers for the stragglers), I justified my first and only stop along the way.

"Mind if I use your phone?" I asked hopefully.

They brought me a cordless, and I called Michael to say I wouldn't be making it for dinner.

"Maybe we'll make it later?" he asked.

"No," I replied, "at this rate I might not even make breakfast!"



Putting Ms. Moss' words to the test at dusk [as one more sign that I had lost my mind, the race number looked right-side up to me]

I limped back to the point on the road where I had left off. Man, had it felt good to stop! And man, was it tough to make myself start running again! Left foot, “move!” Right foot, “move!” Left foot... Focus, focus. More mind games, more pain.

The brief stop had caused my bad knee to swell up even worse – so much so, that it wouldn’t bend any more. I wondered if I was irreparably injuring my knee. Common sense should have told me that even winning the race wouldn’t have been worth chancing permanent damage, but at that point I was ready to sacrifice my knee to the ego gods. I hobbled ahead like I was lugging a ball and chain, swinging my stiff, straightened leg around to the outside with each step in an incredibly awkward and inefficient gait. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see my cheerleading family making their way back inside, shaking their heads at the ridiculous sight.

The hills seemed to be getting steeper, and my slow pace was slowing even further. Wasn’t I entitled to some sort of second wind? The concept seemed foreign, and my mind went off on another tangent. Wasn’t there some song back in the eighties about second wind? “Don’t forget your second wind” or something like that? Once I remembered the melody, I realized it was a Billy Joel song I didn’t even like back in the eighties – but now it was stuck in my head for miles on end.

“You’re only human,” the song says over and over again, “You’re supposed to make mistakes!”

“Sure, Billy,” I countered, “but unfortunately human just won’t cut it today.”

I knew that finishing this race would require a superhuman effort; a mere human would just roll over and die on the spot. As for life’s mistakes, this one sure was a doosie, and I didn’t feel in the least like this was a mistake I was supposed to have made; rather, I was tempting fate to bump me off.

Each painful step jostled my brain with an ever louder, internal drum beat as I tried to occupy my thoughts with enough absurdities to keep going. The light was fading fast, and a chilling fog rolled in to replace it. I was eventually distracted by a strange, green glow coming from within the fog. Now I don’t have any genuine trips to use as a comparison, but I would venture that the psychedelic hallucinations playing out in my brain at that point would rival anything that Jimi Hendrix, Jerry Garcia, or John Lennon could have mustered with chemical assistance.

The strange little firefly soon transformed itself into a light saber, wielded by a spooky figure gradually emerging from the mist. On my mind’s movie screen, the figure quickly became an amalgamation of the grim reaper, Sauron of Mordor, and Vader the Sith Lord. I pressed forward toward the light; it could have been space aliens in the sky with diamonds for all I cared, as long as they’d beam me straight to the finish line.

As I approached the figure and returned to reality from my magical mystery tour, it turned out to be simply a benign aid worker handing out glow sticks.

“So you don’t get run over,” he said to me on the handoff.

I grabbed it and dove back through the veil of fog into oblivion. The glow was inadequately dim. “It’s broken!” I shouted back to the Darth Vader stand-in.

“Shake it up!” he shouted back to me.

Sure enough, a good shake got its luminescence going, and I now had another eighties tune in my head to oust Billy Joel and keep me company out to the last turnaround.

At this point I could really tell where I stood, because any glow lamps still approaching from the other direction would mean someone was still behind me. After running a mile or two back toward the finish line, I had counted four other stragglers like myself. So I wasn’t quite the saddest of sacks, but I was darn close.

This was the last leg of the last leg, and it was finally starting to feel like I was nearing the end. With four miles to go, a set of headlights emerged on the horizon. I debated tossing my pet glow worm to increase my chances of getting run over by a farm truck, which, in turn would give me an excuse not to have to finish the race. My new little friend’s fluorescent glow was so mesmerizing, though, that I couldn’t bring myself to part with him. I started a dialogue instead that quickly morphed into the nonsensical lyrics of the tune *Birdhouse in Your Soul*:



I’m your only friend  
I’m not your only friend  
But I’m a little glowing friend  
But really I’m not actually your friend  
But I am

As the slow-moving headlights approached ever closer, I figured I ought to stop talking to myself to avoid being mistaken for criminally insane by the vehicle's passengers. Given my slow, stiff-legged motion and the green glow lighting my face from below, I could just imagine some frightened child glued to the window of the passing vehicle – forever claiming to have encountered the living dead in Guerneville. Blinded by the headlights, I smiled and waved as the vehicle passed, trying to look as sane and docile as possible. I was met with a piercing horror scene of my own that prompted me to pick up the pace with a sudden burst of energy; it was a vanload of zombies – the dreaded lawsuit-prevention device that they send out at dusk to pick up those who have no hope of finishing in time: *The straggler bus!*

When the race organizers warned all of the participants about the cutoff time that morning, I had dismissed the admonition as not applicable to myself, who would surely finish the race in less than sixteen hours. Now the bus only had to make it the short distance to the turnaround point before it would be in hot pursuit.

Some more quick calculations based on my (so-called) speed relative to the bus told me that my current pace would get me picked up a mile from the finish line. One lousy mile! If I wanted to finish, I'd have to shave fourteen minutes off my time. Yes, by the way, it is possible to “run” a fourteen-minute mile. It's kind of like when kids try to see who can ride their bike the slowest without falling. Technically, in order to *run*, you don't necessarily have to move more quickly than a walker; one foot just has to leave the ground before the other hits the ground. Over 22 miles, I had proved that a fourteen-minute mile pace is the absolute slowest possible pace at which you can run. Any slower and you're pretty much just hopping in place.

I did my best to pull it together and pick up the pace. After running that long, though, changing your pace even slightly forces you to use a whole different set of muscles. Prolonged pain gets you intimately familiar with every single muscle in your body, and now there was a whole new set of muscles talking back to me as I tried to make my case with more mind-over-matter exercises; I counted off the final mile markers with the bus in hot pursuit.

The dim lights of Guerneville came into view as I emerged from the woods and made my way down the final hill. I kept looking back to make sure there was still somebody behind me for the bus to pick up. I

caught an occasional glimpse of the headlights coming over the hills along with a few hopeless figures still stumbling along behind me. As I made the last turn with a half mile or so to go, though, I looked back and saw that there was nothing but bugs between me and the headlights. The thought of this much investment only to get picked up a few hundred yards from the finish line...

With the help of a chill breeze and a soaked T-shirt, it felt like the bus was literally breathing down my sweaty neck. The temperature dropped in an instant as I passed a depression with ponds on either side of the road. A mist was rising from the water's surface, and the headlights were approaching close enough behind me to cast my shadow through the fog all the way to the banner at the finish line. As I pressed ahead, something rustled in the bushes right next to me. The shadows took on frightening shapes in my mind, and from somewhere ingrained deep in my DNA, a primal fear arose. Goose bumps spread, shudders moved up and down my spine, and an instinctive alarm gripped my body thanks to countless primordial ancestors who had spent eons of time evading their predators.

Did I possess the genetic mutation that would allow my originating species to survive as the fittest, while my less fit competitor was tranquilized and devoured up by the voracious van? Or would it be the other way around? I imagined that this ravenous creature was seeking to prevent my DNA from reaching the next generation and that all of humanity depended on my race toward refuge. Raw instinct took over and I made one final, panicked dash for the safety of the finish line.



The Straggler Bus



A slow-moving shadow of a figure appeared in front of me; and what do you know – with this final kick I actually passed somebody! I prayed that this poor wretch would somehow block for me, perhaps by collapsing in front of the bus so they'd have to break out the stretcher. Would this victim stall them long enough to let me finish?

Thankfully, the hunter stayed put; I heard official voices emerging from within the van's jowls, trying to coax the prey off the course. Sure enough, he was snatched up and – as if by divinely decreed intercession – the sorry sucker I had passed ultimately became the last casualty of the straggler bus.

I only had to make it a few more steps, but even that required me to squeeze out every fume of energy left in my body's reserve tank. Perhaps the incentive to stay on my feet for these final steps came not so much from my own determination, but more out of the fear that if I didn't actually finish, I might be stupid enough to try the whole thing again someday just to “knock the bastard off” my list, as Hilary so humbly put it when he finally summited Everest. No way was I going to go through this again!

Aided by this unthinkable thought, I left the snarling bus in the dust and realized that I was actually going to finish this thing! Seriously? I had been going for so long; would my body even know what to do when I stopped? I thought of that Greek guy Philippides who ran the first marathon ever. Well he finished his race, too, but died on the spot when he stopped. And his day didn't include swimming and biking. So maybe this last-ditch kick wasn't such a smart idea after all; maybe my heart was on its last beat; maybe “summit fever” is a human trait that nature – in an act of self-preservation – prefers to do without, in which case the Darwin Award would go to me instead of the busload of stragglers (who, after all, would live to pass along their genes while I might go ahead and join the frozen corpses on Everest by permanently removing myself from the pool).

By the time I had convinced myself that I was about to follow Philippides to my own doom, it was too late for any reservations; I crossed that finish line in disbelief, crusty knee and all. In one final act of exuberance, my fists shot into the air, with index fingers pointing to the sky. My joints turned to jelly as I stumbled to a gradual stop; with zero remaining lung capacity, the accompanying shout came out somewhere between a whisper and a wheeze:

“I...AM....I.....RON.....MAN!”



## BIG FINISH

Though I couldn't really fathom the notion that it was actually over, I had never been so relieved in my life! This was the moment I had been picturing every step of the way...except that I had to use my imagination to fill in the mass jubilation part. Pretty much everyone had split for the night, so instead of a cheering throng, there was just a guy with a timer. He said “good job” as I passed him, but with an intonation that really meant “thanks for making me stand here in the dark waiting for you to finish.”

I had seen clips of the Hawaii Ironman finish scene, where everyone parties on Ali'i Drive until the last finisher is done. Maybe it's ludicrous to have the same expectation of Guerneville, CA, where curious cows are the only onlookers, but that was the only image I had ever pictured in terms of a finish line scene. I was in too much pain to think of the anticlimactic finish for too long, though, and nightlife was the last thing I was looking for. Within a minute they had already unplugged the digital clock and pulled the banner down behind me. One of the last remaining race officials pulled out the master list. His bright red pencil hovered over my name like a destroying angel...then passed me by to seal the fate of the stragglers in the bus with their final judgment: a big, fat “DNF.”

I stumbled to a chair in the recovery tent completely sick, exhausted, and numb in both body and brain. I was still sitting there in a daze a half hour later when they started taking the tents down. I decided I'd better get up, but I couldn't move; I was absolutely paralyzed. I struck up a conversation with my limbs, telling them to drag my butt out of the

chair; I got zero cooperation. Like the poor creature without arms, legs, or any senses in Metallica's *One*, I could literally feel my soul trapped inside a non-functioning shell of a body. Johnny got his gun, alright...and I was right there with him in spirit; they'd just have to dismantle the tent around me. The event manager passed by and politely prodded me in the shoulder, checking for signs of life

"I'm not dead yet," I said; but the joke was lost on him. I was afraid he might whack me over the head with a tent post and chuck me into the back of his rental truck. I obviously wasn't going for a walk anytime soon – at least not under my own power – so my only way out would have to be over his shoulder.



"I think I'll go for a walk"

It wasn't until a few years later that I realized how well the rest of Ozzy's Ironman lyrics fit the situation:

Has he lost his mind?  
Can he see or is he blind?  
Can he walk at all?  
Or if he moves will he fall?  
Is he 'live or dead?  
Has he thoughts within his head?  
We'll just pass him there.  
Why should we even care?

That may as well have been the cleanup crew talking as they folded up the tent around me, shaking their heads. Finally when they needed my chair I mustered the strength to push myself up into a standing position, then stumbled forward to the shuttle stop to head back to the starting line. I don't know how long I stood there staring off into the dark before I realized that the bus had stopped running. I was already chilled and nauseated – which was now intensified by the frightful thought of having to hoof it for two long miles to get to the car; luckily I was

able to talk some of the last remaining volunteers into letting me hitch a ride. I chatted with them along the way and thanked them for helping to successfully pull off such a complicated event. At least that's what I meant to say; by the time they dropped me off at the parking lot I was totally delirious and had no idea what was actually coming out of my mouth.

I limped to the car and saw the Vaseline and little round Band-Aids that I was supposed to have brought with me on the road in my supply kit...I wouldn't feel the true effects of that oversight until the next morning. I crawled into the driver's seat, stinking up Michael's new Bimmer. Everything went hazy as I sat there. I woke up at the wheel with a shudder, thinking I had fallen asleep driving. I had never actually left, but looking at my watch, I had apparently managed to get a few hours rest; with this brief rejuvenation I was finally ready to head out on the road for real.

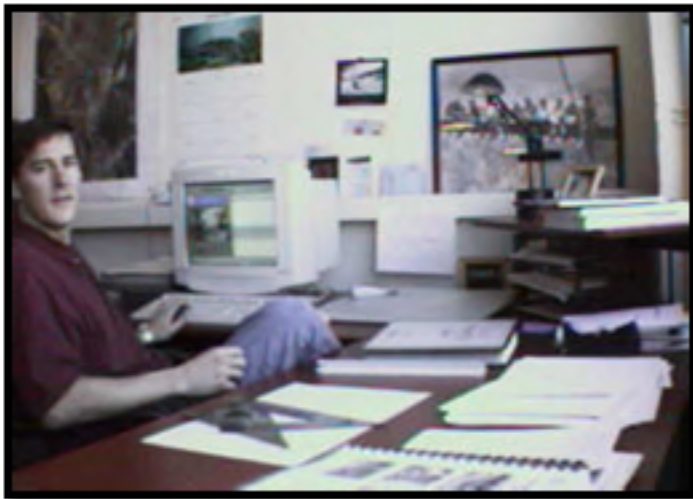
I had trouble working the pedals, even with my good leg. Luckily I didn't see any cops on the way back; if I had been pulled over, I'd have ended up with a DUI for sure, since I'd never have been able to walk the line, let alone even walk, period. The next day's light was beginning to appear on the horizon by the time I pulled into Oakland a full 24 hours after my pre-pain departure. I crashed on the couch, one big heap of stink.

I felt even worse a few hours later when Michael woke me up, shaking my shoulder. So many muscles ached that I felt like one big, interconnected, sore muscle. He was on his way to a dawn church service and asked if I was coming along. "Only if they have a drive-in," I countered. But he was my ride to the airport, so I had no choice. I figured I could rest for a few more minutes if I skipped a shower, but a sliver of empathy arose on behalf of my fellow parishioners and air passengers. I hosed off and threw my gear into a duffel bag, which had to ride in the trunk on account of the smell.

After a sermon in which the mount reminded me of Death Hill, we made our way to the airport. Though it was small enough to carry on board, I checked my bag in so that airport security wouldn't ground the flight and bring in the HazMat crew to decontaminate the cabin. Maneuvering into my seat on the plane was a challenge, but I fell asleep within a few seconds of sitting down. Once I landed, I came to an enlightened appreciation of the Phoenix Airport's moving walkways. My girlfriend picked me up, and apparently I did enough complaining on the five-

minute drive to my apartment to earn the title *Whineman*. By the way, that girl is now my wife and I haven't been able to drop the nickname yet. I flopped myself down on the couch but felt no relief – gravity itself had become painful. I drifted off into oblivion, and the rest of the day was a blur.

When I woke up to go back to work on Monday morning, I found I couldn't put any weight on my bad knee. I grabbed a baseball bat to use as a crutch, drove to work, and hobbled up the stairs into my office. I tried to avoid my coworkers on the way in, since I thought they might notice I was wearing the little round Band-Aids under my shirt now. Besides, my bow-legged walk was only made possible with gobs of Vaseline, and I really didn't want to answer any questions about that. Nobility? Dignity? I don't think so. I flopped into my office chair and marveled at its surface area that allowed my pounds to spread out over so many more square inches than that blasted bike seat. Then I just sat there wondering why we still seek out torture when we have the choice to live a life of comfort. Dull began to take on a positive connotation, and I finally realized why I should appreciate my desk job.



Sinking back into a soft swivel chair

My father once told me – while I was laid up with a broken shoulder at age twelve – that I should focus on the other arm and be thankful it still worked. While this perspective beat his lame jokes (e.g., “you won't find this humorous, but you've broken your humerus!”), it still hadn't managed to help me take my mind off the pain at the moment. With my added years of maturity since that time, I thought maybe I'd give his words of wisdom another chance. I pictured the muscle and ligament dude from the anatomy

books and tried to focus on each part of my body, searching in vain for something to be thankful for; it felt like every single inch of every single muscle ached.

My wandering focus got stuck, though, when I realized that pain can have a shape: the pain in my rear was actually imprinted in the shape of a bike seat. Just when I thought my father's words didn't apply to me, though, I did manage to think of something to be thankful for...very thankful, in fact. I recalled one of Ms. Moss' interviews with some particularly detailed disclosures about having soiled herself during her famous race. I quickly verified her confession in an online video, cringed a bit, and became very grateful that, despite my stumbling finish, I had managed to retain at least one last element of muscular control at the finish line. And as an added bonus, my finish wasn't broadcast on national TV and made available to a world wide web of gawkers! And what do you know? In the process of focusing my thoughts right between my aching glutei maximi, I actually managed to identify a muscle that didn't hurt! I decided to look on the bright side of life and, blaspheme or not, thanked the Lord for my functional and quite painless sphincter.

Well, Ms. Moss may have crawled across the finish line, but my body felt like I had crawled the whole 140.6-mile stretch. And gauging from my time, I may as well have. A few days after the race – just for kicks – I timed my little niece as she crawled across the room; sure enough, she was going faster than my marathon pace. When the race results came in the mail, they confirmed that I had finished dead last – behind every man, woman, and child who finished. The Ironman executives have actually trademarked the phrase, “Brag for the rest of your life.” Well, I sure didn't feel like I had anything to brag about. At the time, the pessimist in me was completely humiliated at having finished last. But following my name were some numbers. Those numbers indicated my time. And that time – while shamefully prolonged – sure beat the dreaded, three-letter code that could very well have followed my name instead. My bucket list certainly couldn't differentiate between a fast time and a slow time; the goal was just to finish, so the emphasis in my mind gradually went from “finished *last*” to “*finished* last” to “*FINISHED*... (last)”. As soon as I got up the strength to lift things again, I dug through my old boxes, found my cursed bucket list, and crossed that puppy off of it.



## I AM MORONMAN!

A moron, by the way, isn't half bad if you go by the dictionary definition:

mo·ron [**mohr**-on] *noun*. Stupid or lacking in good judgment. On former psychological scales, considered slightly mentally superior to imbeciles and even more superior to idiots.

So a moron actually sits at the top of the dogpile! Maybe it was time to just own this thing and be proud of my new title! The *hole-in-the-head* trophies given to the finishers the first few years in Hawaii certainly bear some not-so-subtle symbolism. Colonel John Collin, who first came up with the idea of an *Ironman* competition, hoped the race would always be open to the “common man” because of its origins. Well, here was one more for the common man, proving that a little stupidity and a lot of ego can go a long way.



I take a little comfort in the accounts of the early years of the Ironman, before they implemented cutoff times. Those first few years you hear stories about people stopping in diners for breakfast or being out on the course while the morning paper gets delivered (with the other finishers' results already in print!) The record actually belongs to a guy in his seventies who took 26 hours to finish. Looking at the results of the inaugural race, it turns out Colonel Collin himself would have been scooped up by the straggler bus. That's right; I would have actually beaten somebody in 1978!

As for Julie Moss, she came back to Kona in 2003 to try it again on the 25th anniversary of the world championship, but she never was able to live down the agonizing finish in '82 that made her famous. It only seems fitting to end with another Julie Moss quote that she recently gave in a nostalgic interview:

“I tell people that their first Ironman should be their best one, because finishing should be their only expectation.”

Well as for me, I believe the first Ironman should be not just the best one, but the last one, too.

## EPILOGUE

It's been quite a few years now since the “slappa in Napa.” My wife claims there's fifty pounds of me she isn't married to, and my original list has become more of an amusing reminder of days gone by than a bona fide bucket list. With five kids at home, personal goals seem selfishly trivial, and just getting them to bed at night is enough of a challenge for me; in fact, if they made a marathon of dad duties, I'll bet I could hold my own against the triath-élites.

We recently ditched all the kids for an anniversary trip to Hawaii. One night as we strolled along the beach on a moonlight walk, my wife turned to me and said, “Well, honey, it's a sign – we've crossed the finish line.” I thought she was getting all figurative and sentimental on me, but then she pointed up. And there, quite literally, was a sign: “Official Finish – Ironman Triathlon.”



From that vantage point, a quarter century flashed in front of my eyes. I could see the ABC TV camera right in front of me, with Julie Moss on her knees on one end and a naïve little twelve-year old on the other end with a big dream and absolutely no idea of the other adventures that lay ahead on life's path. It certainly wasn't how I had pictured it, but I had reached my goal nonetheless.

Well call me crazy, but the next time I looked in the mirror, that list started taunting me again; I realized it was time to dive into a greater challenge. I needed a preemptive strike to prevent the onset of a mid-life crisis, so I dug out my list once again and went through the remaining items one by one. I figured I'd go easy on myself at first, so I eliminated things that might involve physical pain, bankruptcy, or risk of premature death; unfortunately that nixed most of my list, but in the end I did find the next item to tackle: #24. *Learn Spanish.*

## VAMANOS!

*Krey now lives in Australia with his wife and five children. He works a desk job as a civil engineer and occasionally takes his kids on a bike ride around the neighborhood, boring them to no end with his Ironman stories and practicing his Spanish: “¡Soy hombre con retrasado mental!” Contact the author at hampton@krey.org.*