

# The 7 Disciplines of Ironman

## An Ironman Cozumel Race Report

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\*This race report is from my point of view. I am not putting words or making assumptions of any other triathlete. Some profanity included.\*

Most people think that triathlon is predominantly made up of three (3) disciplines; swim, bike and run. Triathletes understand that there is a 4th, nutrition. I have realized a 5<sup>th</sup>. Throughout training there has been mention of it, but until I actually experienced it for myself I wouldn't have believed it. There are many different names I'm sure, but I call it Precision Thought Process. Precision Thought Process is the act of trying to keep your head together and mind sharp in the weeks that lead up to race day. The mind fog that works against PTP begins to get thickest around 4-5 weeks out. All I could focus on was training. When and where would my next workout would be? When was my next meal and when could I take a nap? I could tell you what my heart rate was for each interval on a 10 mile run, but I'll be damned if I could subtract 30 from 100, or figure out what I was going to wear for work. I was checked out. At first I tried to fight it, but in the end I succumbed and trusted all of my life decisions to my wife, calculators and Google search. Now that I was aware of all the elements involved, I set out to combine all five in a concerted effort to finish my first Ironman. I set it as my "A" race early 2013, but had already talked myself out of it by June. I used the excuse that I didn't want the added stress of racing internationally on top of finishing an Ironman. I broke the news to my coach and was ready to eat the entrance fee of \$650 that I had already paid. It was during a get together after a local race that I ran into some folks that were doing IM Cozumel and getting excited about it. Talk about a contagious sport. I quickly and silently berated myself for being a puss and told my coach the good news. I was back in! Ah ha! There was a 6<sup>th</sup> Discipline: Mental Fortitude. The mind is a very powerful tool. It can be your greatest ally or worst enemy. I was back on the road to Ironman. Along the road I also enjoyed my first Half Ironman distance, but that is a different story. On to the race report....

I awoke Saturday morning the week before Ironman Cozumel (IMCOZ) with a hotness behind my eyes that could only be one thing; the flu was knocking on my door. Naturally, I didn't answer. I drew the blinds and silently willed it to move along. Like an encyclopedia salesman peeping through the window seeking fresh meat to peddle his wares to; it refused. I doubled down on vitamins C, B and every home remedy I could think of including good old Irish medicine (whiskey), all the while refusing to verbalize that I might be sick. I kept the lights out and the curtains drawn hoping that my flu salesman would grow tired and just walk away. He never did. Going into my 'A' race at 70% was pissier but what was I going to do? Walk away? If the bug was going to stick around, I was going to stick around. I just adjusted my race goals accordingly.



Our arrival to Cozumel went fairly smooth. We chose to arrive on Friday before the race to minimize the chances of acquiring Montezuma's revenge. The tradeoff was a time crunched Friday afternoon that involved dragging our bags and taxi jumping through town picking up race packets, checking in, bike pick up and a mandatory prerace meeting. I was strangely calm through the whole evolution. I simply made a mental checklist as to what the priorities were vs.

time frame left to accomplish them. Getting registered was my first, then pick-up my bike (Tri Bike Transport is the deal. The process was completely hassle-free. Best money spent), and attend the meeting. I ended up skipping the meeting. With all the athletes running around I figured I could just ask someone if I had any questions. During all this running around the wind was whipping to and fro and it was drizzling on and off. As a result, the course practice swims were all cancelled (there were white caps out there). We finally made it our hotel hungry and frazzled, but the mission was complete. Now it was chill time.

Saturday morning after breakfast there was a fleeting moment of calm in the water, so I took the opportunity to get in at the hotel beach. As soon as my face hit the water, the wind, surge and rain returned. "Screw it". I needed the warm up. With 0% visibility I set out. I quickly realized that I had been spoiled swimming in lakes and pools as I was tossed around effortlessly by the sea. The closest thing I had to compare it too in terms of training was Kemah, TX, but that was so many months ago I couldn't fall back onto it with any confidence. As my swim confidence plummeted, crashing at the bottom, I was stung by a jellyfish. I swam back to shore feeling sick, stung and demoralized by my amateur hour performance in the ocean. Rachele asked if everything was ok as I came out of the water. I put my best smile and said, "Of course! I just came in for a second. I am heading back out". She headed out for a morning run and I waded back into the ocean. I got to about my waist, stood there then turned around defeated for the day making my way back to shore.

Sunday morning had finally arrived. I had no issues sleeping the night before and awoke very calm but excited. Earlier in the year I felt like I was going to drop from heart issues I was so wracked with nerves. My coach imparted some good wisdom and gave me some good reading. Since then, I just don't get nervous anymore. It is nice. I was more stressed about my nutrition clearing customs than anything else. (The few people I talked to about my particular brand of nutrition would get it if I said that losing it to customs might have been a good thing.) At 4:30am I went down to meet the others (Cathy Beavers and Vicky Jones) and eat about a 1,000 calorie breakfast. I apologized to everyone for being grumpy over the last couple of days, explaining that a combination of being borderline sick and focused on the task ahead didn't leave much room for social interaction. My wife shared with me all the well wishes from friends via Facebook and that did wonders to boost my morale even more than it already was. At 5:15 we set out for the swim start. Having the ability to nap just about anywhere I tried to catch a 20 min snoozer on the bus ride. Success! It was very much worth it.

Wishing Cathy and Vicky good luck for the final time, I made my way to the beach and eventually into the water where I took advantage of my Navy water survival training skills waiting patiently for the gun to go off. I thought about yesterday and decided that I was glad that the damn jellyfish got his meathooks into me because now I knew what it felt like and wouldn't lose it if it happened during the real deal. I also decided that if the stupid sick bug wasn't going to leave my porch I was going to burn it off with 140.6 miles of GTFO with an hour of that from sinus douching in salt water. CRACK! There went the gun



and away we went. The water was frothy from the beating of arms. I had never seen anything like it live, so I took a second to take it all in. My second was cut short as the swimmers behind me thought that it would be easier to go through me rather than around me. I snapped back to the task at hand and started my 1 & 2 &.. chanting knowing that would keep me on pace. The weather had really cooperated that morning and visibility was up to 100%. As a result, time passed quickly by watching and waving to the divers below. Zigging and zagging around other swimmers (I still can't believe I am able to pass people, I was such a crappy swimmer at the beginning of the year) I settled into a rhythm. I didn't worry about looking for jellyfish as that would only waste energy. Instead, I jumped in on someone's heels hoping they would find the critters and they would spin off to the sides away from me. The first mile ticked off quicker than expected. I took a quick look at my Garmin and saw low 30's (minutes). Switching swim victims, I moved up to someone else increasing my pace just a bit. Hearing the announcer up ahead got my heart pumping with excitement. Knowing that there was many hours left in the day I didn't let it get me swimming any faster than I was, though I wanted to. I rounded the last buoy and made my way against the current towards the swim exit. Exiting the water I hit lap on my watch and was happy with my time at just under an hour. Lesson Learned: Your time doesn't stop until you cross that damn mat. I just got excited is all. The mat was another 100 or so yards up ahead and I was satisfied walking to it. I saw Rachele and waved. Seeing her was exactly what I needed to start my long ride coming up. My official swim time was 1hr 1min.

Into the sauna or I mean changing tent I went. I took my time drying off and getting some compression on as it wasn't allowed in the water. I lathered up with Hoo-ha Cream and sunscreen as well as drank my first installment of Ucan (nutrition). From here on out my plan was to drink 1 serving of Ucan every 1.5 hours and 3 Endurolyte pills every 2 hours. I would eat a Bonk Breaker bar at mile 60ish and another during mile 18ish on the run. Armed with nutrition and my heart rate zones committed to memory I headed out to my bike. I didn't know this at the time, but Rachele was tracking me via an app on her phone. When my T1 time posted it was 14 minutes and change. Lesson Learned: Time flies when you're chilling out in the changing tent and you think 17 hours to complete the race of your lifetime is plenty of time.



"One event at a time" were the words of a colleague at work. Swim was done and I felt great, so let's see about this bike ride around the island which might be fun. Off I went. A quick scan of my computer told me my heart rate (HR) was at 77bpm. My target was 115 with a max at 132. I was already going 21mph. Wow! I had tons of tons of room to kick it up a notch. Today was going to be my day! Then the readout changed to 38. What the.....Are you kidding me?! I started to monkey with my strap and computer when I made several sudden swerves. I decided that I had tons of day left and rather than eat it at mile 1, I would stop for a minute and see if I could fix it. Negative. Totally pissed and feeling lost without my data, my coach's words came floating back to me, "Ironman is one whole race of problem solving. Your whole day will be jumping from one problem to the next." The 7<sup>th</sup> Discipline: Effective Problem Solving. I smiled to myself and decided to 'have fun' (something else my

coach told me to do). I had done enough riding over the year to know where my HR was in relation to exertion levels. While not an exact science it was the best I was going to get today. Making my way around to the other side of the island, home of the headwinds, it began to rain. Man did it feel good, as a matter of fact I felt good all over. I grew suspicious thinking, "You're not supposed to feel good during an Ironman". Rather than fight it I rolled with it. I was going to own the day. Round the corner heading north, the winds were coming in at a 45 deg off of the nose on the right. They were noticeable, but still a whisper compared to what Galveston has dished out. As I rode along I noticed that you could get a pretty good start on a bike build with all of the parts lying on the road. I didn't pack CO2 and everyone was sold out upon arrival. I borrowed one from some people I met at the hotel (only confirming that once again triathletes are a very cool breed), but I could have picked up one of the many cartridges that littered the road. Keeping my eyes out for a shorter set of cranks I made my way through town completing my 1<sup>st</sup> loop. The spectators in town were nothing short of amazing. It was easy to absorb the energy that was coming at us. With morale tanks on full I started the 2<sup>nd</sup> lap.



My body gave me some great news. I had to pee. Woot! My hydration was working and on track. Even though my onboard internal water bag had sprung a small leak, I still managed to get enough water in me. The problem solving continues. With a full bladder I proceeded out of town heading south wondering at the best way to handle it. Then a solution presented itself about 50

meters in front of me. A German rider was moving along with his left foot unclipped. At first I thought he was doing a single leg drill, crazy Germans. Then I saw his true intent; with one leg off and out he manipulated his urinating appendage through his shorts and was peeing on the fly. "Crazy, Brilliant, Germans", I thought as I maintained my 50m split. Going so far as unclipping my left foot the words from my coach came floating back through my head, "Race day is not the time to try something new". This definitely classified as just that. Hmmm. "Well, I guess I just sit here and do it the old fashioned way or.....there it was, a row of port-o-potties. I didn't want to stop but I did some quick thinking and figured that the time split from stopping vs. the time spent slowing down to try and pee and washing it off (wasting water) and risking a crash balanced out. I stopped. Another .5 miles down the road I saw Rachele; making sure I looked good for the camera, I smiled and waved then pressed on. The rest of the second lap was uneventful. My HR came back around mile 65 but disappeared again by 90. I made a quick stop into special needs to change out nutrition and water. Not wanting to have another picnic since I had one in T1, I quickly got back underway. The pros came flying by at break neck speeds and I

was half tempted to jump on to see how long I could hang. I didn't. I was content to think about how cool it is to race on the same course and alongside, albeit briefly, the pros.

Lap 2 down and I felt awesome. I was going back and forth between 21 and 15-16 mph. I was pretty happy. My legs and butt were feeling great after 80 miles. On my training rides things were always getting sore at 60 miles (I love the taper). 1 more lap to go. I stopped to pee one more time. I wasn't too happy about the light coffee color, but at least it was something. At mile 90ish I rounded the southern tip of the island. At this point I was dreading the sign that read "Punta Sur", translated in english, "The Headwinds Cometh". The wind had really picked up by now. It was still not at a Galveston level but strong enough to be annoying. Prior to the race I had received two motivational speeches. The first was from my wife. She used some Navy motivation. "You're a Senior Chief in the United States Navy. A Chief can handle anything." The second was from my brother. He used a Blade Runner (my favorite movie) approach. "You're a Nexus 6, more human than human. You're not Pris, the pleasure model, but Roy Batty, the fucking combat model and you were built to nail the Ironman." I called upon those words and used them to get me through my last leg north. Needless to say it worked. As I made the left turn towards town for the final stretch, my legs were finally beginning to feel a bit whooped and my feet felt like they had hot poker just under the pedals. It was excruciating. It passed after 3 miles and with 3 miles left to T2 I was back on top. I never did find another crank arm lying around, but still considered it a good ride with zero flats, 2 pee breaks and flawless nutrition. I roll into T2 thinking, "2 down 1 to go. My weakest leg." I hated the marathon ever since running my first one in Honolulu. I hated it again after my 2<sup>nd</sup> and then my 3<sup>rd</sup>. I really hated it after my 4<sup>th</sup>. This would be my 5<sup>th</sup> and I had no illusions that I would probably like it this time any better. Like vegetables (I eat them because they are good for me not because I like them), I run the marathon because it is good for me on a level that I can't describe. In T2 I reapplied a ton of sunblock, insect repellent and fluids. I took my last four Advil (6 earlier in the ride), some electrolytes and changed out my socks. No words can describe how great dry socks felt. Meanwhile, my wife was out on the exit side of the changing tent yelling, "What are you doing in there? Knitting a blanket?!" Over 11 minutes had passed. What the hell?! The changing tents seem to be stopping time inside while outside I swear it speeds up. I took in a last sip of water and put a smile on and went out to meet my fans. My wife was snapping pics urging me to get the lead out.



Once out of the exit chute and around the corner out of sight of family I stopped. Not following protocol, I decided to attach two gel flasks to my race belt without run testing them first. I figured it would have little impact to me. I was wrong. Those two things were flopping around like, well let's just say flopping around. I couldn't imagine running 26 more miles like that, so I had to take them off. Now I don't know about anyone else, but I HATE having things in my hands when I run. It was time to problem solve again. Option 1: Carry them. Option 2: Pitch them. Option two seemed like the best choice at the time as

already stated, I hate carrying anything and at this point I was so sick of my nutrition that my stomach would threaten to empty what little it had in it at the mere thought of Lemon-Lime Ucan. I decided to clench my teeth, work on my mental training and carry them....ugh. All right let's finish this thing. I decided that if I was going to meet with any level of success, I had to break the run down into a more manageable size. I went with a 1 mile at recommended pace followed by a 1 min fast walk, focusing only on the mile at hand and nothing else beyond that. The weather was overcast and not too hot. Things were going perfect...until mile 3. My illusions of running a marathon with dry socks were washed away when the sky opened up and dumped rain so heavy and thick that it made a Texas rain shower seem like a fine mist coming from a leaky garden hose. For the first time that day I thought, "This is going to suck". I love running in the rain, but with 23 miles to go, a crappy city drainage system and blisters looming on the horizon, it was hard not to think about my 15 hour time I had set for myself. Sopping wet, foggy glasses and an empty belly, I put a smile on my face and plodded on. I didn't doubt my finish as long as I played it smart. There were plenty of miles left to collapse or cramp and I was determined to not let that happen to me. Each lap seemed incredibly long; especially when I saw the 18 mile marker and I was only on mile 5 (multi-loop courses can be a drag). Ignoring those signs, I focused on my Garmin and knocking down 1 mile at a time. I stopped to pee again on the 1<sup>st</sup> lap, so I know I was still doing well with my hydration. The trick was not to drink each 8oz bag of refreshing cold water the volunteers would hand me. Setting my resolve, I only drank what I needed and poured the rest over my head. Despite the on again off again monsoon I still needed to cool down and cold water on my legs helped them to feel fresh. Coming back into town on the 1<sup>st</sup> and subsequent laps there was water up to my mid-calf. It was comical watching people try and avoid it. I wanted to shout out, "Why? You are already drenched?", but I held my tongue. The most mentally challenging part of the entire race occurred at the end of the first lap of the run. As I approached the turnaround the road was divided by red cones. A volunteer was standing there asking, "Uno or dos mas", which I think means, "Do you want more pain and sopping wet discomfort?" go to the left. "Terminado?" go to the right. "Si. Mas por favor" I said as I drifted to the left path making my way outbound all the while listening to the sirens song of the announcer declaring Ironmen behind me.



The second lap was similar to the first only it was now *dark* and raining. The spectators were in full party mode. In addition to water, Gatorade and Pepsi, we had the option of beer and tequila. Oh how I was tempted, but my resolve held firm. I finished one of my gel flasks and pitched it without hesitation rather than carry it one more step. One more flask to go and I could be free. I finally hit the 18 mile marker at the 18 mile mark and I spied the holy grail of aid at the aid station. It wasn't water or anything else nutritional related, but a lone jar with the words, *Vasolina* written on the side. I think I heard the angels sing. All this wetness was causing some serious chaffing in the nether regions, I mean serious. I took a large handful and like a magician says, "Now you see it now you don't", I made it

disappear into my shorts. Ahhh, now we are talking. 2 laps down, 1 to go. After declaring uno mas, I made my way to the left for the final time. I used my last gel flask (ditching it like I did that flu salesman) and was finally able to run hands free.

At this point with 6 miles left to go I had reached the hardest (physically) part of my race. I wasn't bonking, but was tired and cold. My fast walks weren't so fast and were becoming more frequent. My IT band was annoying me and I was getting hungry. I did a quick calculation and figured I could walk the rest of the way and still make it at a 15m/mile, but every time I walked my eyes got very



heavy. I didn't want to fall asleep and face-plant. Some borrowed advice surface which goes something like, *if it hurts when you run and hurts when you walk, just run. It's going to hurt anyway and you will be done faster.* In addition, I know Rachele had been standing out in the same rain I was running through and I didn't want to make her wait any longer than necessary. I decided to keep running. It was time for my last gel pack. I just couldn't stomach it anymore, so I tossed it and went to bananas and Gatorade. I was still taking my Endurolytes but with 3 miles left I could feel a cramp in my hamstring forming. Not wanting to gimp it across the finish line or even worse falling over and out, I grabbed my salted almonds out of my pocket, threw them in my mouth and sucked the salt off spitting the nut out. I am not sure why I didn't eat them but I knew I need that salt with a quickness. It's amazing how in tune with your body you become during training. It spoke and I listened. Todd O'Neal had mentioned

that flat Pepsi was like rocket fuel so use it sparingly. Now seemed like a good time to me. I used it and holy crap he was right! Coming down the final stretch, I passed the 26 mile marker and proceeded to the right of the cones. I squared my race kit away not wanting to look like complete train wreck for my finishing photo as well as reminding myself to hold my hands above my head in triumph. The announcers' voice that was only a dream 2 laps ago was becoming a reality. The chute was lined with spectators cheering me on. I remember high-fiving everyone and making that final left turn into the grand stand. Some 100 meters up ahead I saw the huge arch with the big screen, the race clock, camera flashes and bright lights. I saw what I had sought after for so long now; the finish line of an incredible journey of self-discovery. The journey was long and definitely not straight. It was curved with rich detail of many experiences and friendships that will be forever remembered through frequent recollection and spun yarns.

**“Michael Robinson from Encinitas, YOU ARE AN IRONMAAAAAAN!”**

(I have never been to Encinitas, but I'll take it)



## Epilogue

After shoveling 4 slices of pizza, 2 quesadillas, 2 Pepsi's and a beer I was ready for a hot shower (to help discover my hot spots) and to get my legs elevated. I did the Ironman shuffle for a few days. Our room was on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor (no elevators) and what Todd said was true. The smallest step is a monumental task. I had 3 flights of stairs, no small feat but hey, I am an Ironman. It may take me some time but I'll get there and I won't give up. Speaking of time, I beat my race goal by 4 minutes with a finish time of 14 hours and 56 minutes.

Thanks:

The journey is never completed alone. I would like give special thanks my coach Melanie Yarzy for applying just the right amount of pressure in the right places throughout 2013; Johnny Zepeda for the great bike fit, studio and keg to facilitate many successful training days; Amy Bredbenner for being a sounding board and letting me analyze her race report from Cozumel last year as well as making my bike look cool. I would also like to thank; Jim Yarzy, Todd O’Neal, Andrea Zepeda, Bill Rieke, Mike Giles and Mayra Painter for great advice and conversation along the way; Ceseilia Perez and Kim Darden for sticking around on the course and cheering me on for my first Half IM; All of my friends who understood that I would be on hiatus from doing just about anything for the year; James Robinson for always believing and being a great brother (Ireland here we come).

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Last but most important: My wife Rachele and my son Jason. She embodied the spirit of Iron Sherpa. She has stuck with me and handled all the important realities for the last 7 months. Life moves on around us and she kept it moving forward. There are just no words to say how appreciative I am of her support. Thanks Rachele. Jason for sacrificing father/son time to long rides and runs. He kept morale boosted with tasty baked goods and a very understanding attitude. Thank you son.

**“Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go” – T.S. Eliot**

I am back! Now let’s see, where did I put my brain again?

