

RACE REPORT
FORD IRONMAN FLORIDA 2006
by Dennis Manalo

The **Ford Ironman Florida 2006** experience was A-M-A-Z-I-N-G! In this report, I decided to spice it up with a little help from one of my family's favorite bands. Though this recap won't necessarily be chronological, you'll get the idea all the same. Thanks to both my partner and my sister-in-law, the selected photos may also visually inspire you to join in on a future Iron-odyssey with me.

Beautiful Day

And that, it was! Weather forecasts suggested highs in the mid-70s at the beginning of the week, but it slowly descended to the upper-60s on the eve of race day. When Showtime came, it was a brisk 42 degrees with blustery 13-16mph winds from the ENE. Those gusts would continue throughout the morning, and the day would warm nicely to 71 degrees in the PM before dipping to a chilly 60 degrees at nightfall.



I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For

Under the condo construction craziness of the Panama City , FL beach boardwalk lies the 5-day mirage oasis of Ironman Village every early November. I flew in Wednesday evening at 9pm, with Mindy, an Iron-hopeful from NJ, to whom I gave a ride down to her hotel before finally getting to my place at 12am. We got lost looking for a late-night supermarket for basic nutrition needs found on every triathlete's list. Then we got lost again looking for our separate accommodations. Direction signs pointing everywhere – I'm still confused. Luckily, come race day, the S-B-R routes were each marked nicely.

Even Better Than the Real Thing

And what could be better than having family around me? Family from Kansas City and Seattle were in town to cheer me on. I got a pre-event basket from Detroit , a post-event phone call from LA, and loving support from before the beginning through the end from my dear Terry, who came down from Vermont – who could beat star treatment like that?

You know what was the best? At Mile 102, I was praying to get off that bike. My brothers and Terry give me a shout-out from a van going in the other direction. They quickly turn around and spend ¼ mile riding along with me, while urging me on, taking photos. They pull away, but I find the entire family waiting two miles down the road (a total party of 9 in the family support crew), holding up this HUGE sheet with my name/number and encouraging notes from everyone – I kept it, and you gotta see it!

I reach T2, change into my running gear, exit for the run course, and there they are AGAIN in that first run mile! I stop a couple of minutes, hugs and kisses all over. We repeat this performance on my first loop back and on my return start for the second. On my last mile, I am looking for them, but no one. Suddenly I see my brother Mike with his sons, my nephews Andrew and Mark. They finish the race with me in what will probably turn out to be a naz finish photo, but who cares? I got the best family ever, and I got pictures to prove it!

Zoo Station

Think of more than 2000 tri-geeks hitting the Gulf of Mexico into a decent swell, getting tossed against one another like bits of styrofoam in a snow globe (not to mention the usual mass swim start come-what-may jockey for position). Yep, you got it, the first loop of the swim (33 minutes). Now, toss in a stronger current, bigger waves. That was the second loop (39 minutes) (TOTAL SWIM: 1:12.53).

T1 was even worse. Imagine a tent the size of $\frac{1}{2}$ a tennis court, and stick about 200-300 guys in there, all changing in the freezing cold (not pretty). I don't know what it was like in the ladies' tent, but most of the time it was more about acrobatics than triathlon. And to think I had to go in there twice: I forgot my sunglasses, so had to enter the fray again, dig out my bag, dig past my wetsuit, and fish out my shades. 3-4 minutes lost in that exercise. Whatever.



I Will Follow

For those of you who don't know, I got a new bike. An '07 Guru Crono. It's fast. Really fast. No joke. Get the idea? Long story why I chose now to get it, but suffice to say, its maiden journey proved it worth every penny.

I haven't really tested its metal, because I had to ship it out 10 days after I got it, leaving me with indoor training (think Vermont's brisk autumn training), and a few outdoor rides in winter gear. Still, I got a pretty good taste of its potential this past weekend. Exiting out of T1, I chase quite a few Cervelo P3 Carbons into the headwinds on the northern/eastern bound end of the journey. I follow my nutrition plan of Gatorade only in the first hour; Clif Bar/Gatorade/GU mix in the second and third hours; and switching to Gatorade/GU for the final hours. Worked for me.

At about Mile 50 of this very FLAT course (great for Iron-newbies/ wannabes), the route goes south, making that the turning point for a lot of us on the course. That wind was now tailing me, even as I went up to 32.8mph. At Miles 75-90, rough, bumpy patches on an out-and-back turned the gusts from friend to foe, and warranted a bathroom break, but it was all good from there. (TOTAL BIKE: 5:34.49)



Sometimes You Can't Make It On Your Own

So, I'm out there on the first loop of the (too flat) run, and I'm chugging along. To keep my mind off the road ahead, I start ticking off my mental list, one person I dedicate to each mile of the marathon (Terry got two). Family, friends, people who are sending me good vibes – they all mentally ran with me on this last portion. Before the turnaround at the first half of the first loop (before Mile 6), signs were put out urging participants on. Among them are three signs from The Best Family Support Crew in the World for me, one of them really funny. That mile was definitely dedicated to my brother David.

Last, but not least, there was Gerry Valentine, a fellow (and highly respected) New York Triton. I was surprised and comforted by his presence, bumping into him the day before the race, exchanging well-wishes the morning of the race, and exhausted grunts on my final run loop. Thanks for the leg up, Gerry! Knowing I wasn't alone helped me finish strong in the end (TOTAL RUN: 4:36.19).



Bad

Rare is the race that goes perfectly. My last race report turned out to be a minute-by-minute, mile-by-mile detail on everything from wrong food ingestion to heat exhaustion. At IMFL, I would have to say it was near-perfect, except for answering nature's constant call on the run leg. At the risk of TMI, I made friends with a lot of port-a-johns in the second half. I definitely over-hydrated, but from the looks of it, so did the people before me.

Sweetest Thing

A chocolate chip cookie at Mile 7, and a sugar cookie at Mile 22 – couldn't help myself! Still, the best was eating barbecue with the family at the end of the evening.

In the end, I ask myself what I could have done better. Aside from the T1 debacle, was it necessary to take that extra sip when I wasn't really thirsty on the bike/run? Probably not. Would I have had a better run time if I didn't stop so much? Definitely, but not reflecting and sharing during those moments wouldn't have made the whole experience as transcendent as it became.

One last note: on my way out, a guy by the name of Brian said thank you a dozen times for my encouraging him on as he staggered through Mile 16. When I asked what I actually did, he said I told him to dig deeper, because under all that pain lies the satisfaction of knowing it can really be done. (TOTAL RACE: 11:37.05)