

Long-Course World Championship, Las Vegas, November 5, 2011

a journal by Bob Morrison

Last year when Jim and Mike said they were going to Myrtle Beach to the national championship race to try to qualify for the World Long-Course Championship in Las Vegas I thought that sounded really neat. It was something I wanted to do. I have been in a number of Ironman races and 70.3 races that were a lot of fun. They are always high quality races and professionally run. And there is always good competition. But last year I was just getting back in shape after a back injury that affected my performance at Ironman Wisconsin in 2008 and hip pain from side effects of treatment for prostate cancer that prevented me from completing Ironman Hawaii in 2009, and that kept me on the couch for several months at the end of 2009 and beginning of 2010. So in October 2010 I was not in shape. But I went to the Outer Banks Half and qualified for the nationals, at a rather slow pace, then went to Myrtle Beach and qualified for worlds in Las Vegas, again at a rather slow pace. At Myrtle Beach I was the only one in my age group, so I guess by default I was the national champion in my age group. I had trained hard for the Las Vegas race and was anticipating a good solid performance in what I thought would be a world-class race run by professionals.

Thursday before the race Jim, Mike, and I went for a short ride on part of the course in Lake Mead Park. The hills were mountainous. Jim had measured the water temperature in Lake Las Vegas and found it to be 60.5 degrees. I was pretty sure the swim on Saturday would be shortened because ITU has detailed rules that determine whether the swim will be shortened or canceled based on the combination of water and air temperatures. Mike and Jim went for a swim in Lake Las Vegas after the bike ride. They said it was cold. I didn't swim because I was saving that cold-water experience for race day. I worried all day Friday about what I thought would be a cold swim on Saturday. On Friday it rained and got colder.

I picked up Shirley and Deb with grandchildren Dana, 10 and Kyle, 6 at the airport Friday afternoon. The kids were wired; they were very excited.

Deb took me to the race site about 5:30 am Saturday morning. I wanted to swim for several minutes before the start so I could be mentally prepared for the cold in-water start. But when I walked into the transition they announced that the swim had been canceled, and they would do a time-trial start, with the elite athletes going at 7:45. The air temperature was 39 degrees. I waited 2 ½ hours in a heated tent before my group was called to get in line for the start. They started the younger age groups first with the older age groups going last. All of the male age groups started before any of the female age groups. So the older female age groups started last. The original wave starts had all athletes over 50 going in the first wave after the elite waves.

As we waited in line I talked to Roger and Paul who took 1st and 2nd in my age group. Roger is a USAT ranked all-American and was the first American in our age group at this year's Ironman Hawaii, and Paul is a top Canadian 70-74 competitor. I knew I would be competing for 3rd place. They were both very cold and shivering as we waited our turns to start. Neal who took 4th place in my age group had some really cool pictures of his 3 granddaughters on his disc wheel. This was going to be fun racing with these very competitive athletes in my age group.

Down the first steep hill my front wheel started wobbling violently and I thought I would crash. I hadn't made sure the slots in the fork were flush with the axle of the front wheel the last time I had attached it, and it was slightly skewed. I stopped and made sure it was flush,

then rode trouble free.

There were two out-and-back segments, and I enjoyed seeing Mike and Jim as I met them on the course. And many of the female competitors offered words of encouragement as they passed me. I enjoyed that too. The hills and the wind were relentless. Some hills were long and rather steep. There were no flat sections. On the downhill segments against the wind I could get on the aerobars and peddle as fast as I could go. But in the crosswinds I felt unstable on the downhills and stayed out of the aero position, occasionally even hitting the brakes. It was scary to look over the guard rails and see how far down you would go if you missed a turn. Out of the park we turned onto a paved bike path that had very steep hills. Just before the 60-mile mark there were three 18% grade hills called the Three Sisters. Although I had broken the rear Zipp wheel I was using on the 18% beast at St. Croix, I was determined not to walk up these hills. And I didn't, though my heart rate was sure high, and the quadriceps were screaming. And the Zipp wheel survived. Then after complete exhaustion we had a 3 to 4 mile uphill segment. In 31 years of doing triathlons this is the most difficult bike course I've ever done.

My whole family was at the bike finish, screaming and cheering, so I went over to give them high fives. The race volunteer who took my bike laughed and said I looked like a celebrity with all that cheering.

The run course consisted of 4 laps, with the first mile down hill. Then two miles up hill and two miles down hill, and so on. So I got to see the family 6 or 7 times as they stood there cheering in the freezing cold. I took it easy the first lap to get adjusted to running (walking and jogging). I saw Jim and Mike several times on the run. They both looked very strong and put in awesome performances. Jim proved that he's ready for an Ironman. On the 3rd lap I was feeling bad and walked most of the two miles up hill. Then I realized that I might not make the 6:30 cutoff. I changed nutrition to coke and broth and started running more, and faster. The coke gave quick, temporary boosts of energy and the broth helped settle my stomach. I was running at a pretty good pace with very little walking. On the last lap at the bottom of the hill a race official said the cutoff had been extended to 7 pm. Whew! I had been running at an uncomfortable pace, so switched to mostly walking back up the hill to the transition/finish area, where another official said I could make the 6:30 cutoff if I hurried. "But", I said, "They said the cutoff had been extended to 7." He said, "You have to be in by 6:30 if you want a time." That wasn't making any sense to me. I started running up the last hill. I was running uphill with a female competitor, exchanging views on what the cutoff was. She insisted that it was 7. We both ran hard down the hill. I saw the family cheering at the beginning of the finish chute waiting for high 5's. But I wanted to make the cutoff. High 5's could wait. The woman I was running with grabbed her national flag and ran ahead of me to the finish line. When I asked the announcer if I had made the cutoff, he said I was good. My time was 9 hours and 38 minutes, but apparently came in several minutes after 6:30 pm. Too late to get a finisher's t-shirt or medal, or awarded 3rd place at the awards ceremony. But I had the personal satisfaction that I had finished 3rd, even though not officially recognized. Fourth place was about 30 minutes behind me. Second and third places in the male 75-79 age group came in after me as well, but were too late to get a time. I think there was too much confusion on the course, and among race officials and organizers, about the cutoff time. The 6:30 pm cutoff time was the same for everybody, no matter whether you were a young guy starting first, or an old lady starting last.

I was 737 out of the 779 who had bike finish times. And 39 of those did not receive run finish times, 9 of whom were listed as DNF. I think there were 900 or more starting, so apparently a large number of others didn't finish the bike segment as well. It was a very tough bike course, with 9,700 feet of climbing. It took me an hour longer than I anticipated to

finish the bike course. Thanks to Jim and Mike for all the training they made me do.

On Sunday we took a tour of Red Rock Canyon where my brother-in-law, Joe, showed Dana and Kyle how to climb a chimney in the rocks. Joe and Karen had been there for several days of climbing. Dana and Kyle were enthusiastic about climbing on the red rocks, and now want to become rock climbers.

Thanks to family, friends, and Tricredibles for all the love and support.

Let's go to St. Croix in May.