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Daily Hampshire Gazette - Established 1786

Published on *GazetteNET* (<http://www.gazettenet.com>)

Triathletes experience the tensions

By *john stifler*

Created 08/05/2008 - 09:41

I think for most people who participate in a marathon or a long bike ride or triathlon, there comes a moment when the tension of the effort - the conscious need to focus on the next step or stroke - gives way to the mind's and the body's realization that, yes, I'm going to finish, and it's really going to feel good.

There are profound emotions in endurance sports, and one of these is a sense of connection to someone else, a deepening of empathy. The best recent articulation I've read of that experience is in an email from Ann Markes of Florence, who completed her first triathlon - the Danskin Triathlon in Webster - on July 27.

The race was a half-mile swim, 12 miles on the bike, and a 3-mile run. Markes finished 213th of 2,468 women overall, and ninth among the 146 women in her age group (50 to 54). Not bad for a first effort. Her total time was one hour, 22 minutes, 43 seconds, which includes 4½ minutes of transition time between legs.

Particularly impressive is that Markes' greatest strength seems to be the swim, which she completed in just 9 minutes, 15 seconds. Conventional wisdom has it that triathlons usually favor the bikers and runners, but Markes came out of the water in 118th place, so she could concede a few places in the other legs and still show up splendidly.

Besides presenting swim-cycle-run events for women all over the country, Danskin's triathlon series also supports the widespread effort to keep people aware of breast cancer. Markes reported that the race was great fun and that she's definitely hooked on the sport, and then she added a poignant comment.

"Racing with thousands of women was particularly powerful, and I was very proud of the breast cancer survivors in particular," wrote Markes, who is a doctor. "I was racing in memory of a

childhood friend who died of breast cancer at age 43, and after I was done, her memory brought on a wave of sadness as I watched so many healthy women finish their races."

Bill Romito of Belchertown has competed in more than 150 marathons and ridden his bike all over the place, and he swims enough to compete in triathlons. The most recent illustration of Romito's relative ability in each leg appeared when he raced in the Lake Placid Triathlon in New York State July 20.

An Ironman consists of a 2.4-mile swim, 112 miles on the bike, and then a marathon run. Romito, who has finished seven Ironmans, called this the most challenging one because it rained the whole time.

"And it didn't just rain," he said. "It was pouring."

Rain doesn't hamper swimming much, although it obscures one's vision, but Romito acquired a serious road rash when a wheel slipped and he took a spill going down the first hill of the bike leg.

"I lost a lot of skin and a little blood, but nothing was broken on me and nothing broken on the bicycle," he observed. He got up and pedaled another 111.5 miles. "It shook me up, but I didn't feel any pain while I was riding or running, until I crossed the finish line. Then I felt the pain. I think my mind had compartmentalized it."

Romito placed 898th out of 2,193 finishers. There were 2,345 athletes who started. To put that performance in perspective, Romito pointed out that when he came out of the water and into the mud-clogged transition area, he was in 2,225th place. In other words, he passed more than 1,300 people in the bike and the run.

"I've gotta work on the swim," said Romito. "It's like being in a washing machine. You're getting tromped. You have to have a high tolerance for being beat up."

He praised Sue Dean of Florence, who finished the Lake Placid Ironman in 11 hours, 24 minutes, including 58:27 for the swim. "That's a swimmer!" said Romito. The most experienced triathlete in the Valley went to this Ironman as a spectator.

Martha Grinnell of Westhampton, who raced as a licensed professional triathlete from 1992 to 2000, went to Lake Placid to watch two women she has been coaching compete in their first Ironman.

One, Carole Demetre of Belchertown, finished in 15 hours, 50 minutes. The other, Angie LaFrance of Westfield, made it as far as the 11th mile of the run before becoming one of the 152 who did not finish.

"She has a full-time job and two kids," said Grinnell of LaFrance, "and she and her husband have both signed up for next year."

Grinnell's own best Ironman was in 1997 at the world championship in Hawaii, where she finished in 10:04, seventh among all women. Now, having just turned 42, she has been enjoying the best training of her post-pro career. She had qualified to race in Hawaii again this fall, but an illness in her extended family compelled her to shelve the Ironman training.

"You have to have a complete commitment to train, and you have to have consistency, so it's not going to be this year, but so be it," she said.

Instead of the Ironman, Grinnell plans to run the Hartford Marathon in October. That will be the first marathon she has run on its own, rather than its being the last leg of an Ironman.

"I'm intimidated by the marathon," Grinnell said. "It'll be a new thing."

Anyone who knows how Grinnell can run would guess that the intimidation should disappear by the time she gets to the Hartford starting line.

As a coach, Grinnell says she works with "anyone who wants to train for anything." One of her current pupils is training for the RAM, a coast-to-coast bike race.

Her favorite athlete these days is Dara Torres, who made this year's U.S. Olympic swim team at 41.

"It's great to be middle-aged and have someone inspire you like that," Grinnell continued. "Granted she's got a team of people who stretch her and do chiropractic work on her every day, but she's breaking American records."

John Stifler, who writes a biweekly column about running and other sports, can be reached at jstifler@econs.umass.edu [1].

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