



## ON NOT FINISHING

Was there a race you didn't finish last season? Has that experience set you down a bit for 2012? Let me tell you about one that I had a while back that has remained in my memory ever since. It's been an important lesson for me all these years. When I don't finish, and I don't every once in a while, I remember it and it picks me right up. It might help you too.

Aug. 4, 1990. Lake Sonoma, Calif. The first running of the Vineman Triathlon. I am aiming for a 15-hour finish, my previous best at the distance being 16:23. To do it I will need a seven-hour bike. The course had seemed pretty flat when I drove over part of it two days before the race. Should be no sweat. Certainly, making the 16-hour time limit should be no problem.

Well, as it turned out, it was a problem. The bike course wasn't flat. For much of it there were rolling hills that didn't seem to be such in the car, and there were a couple of really steep hills that I had just missed. Plus, for about 50 miles the road surface was uncomfortably rough blacktop and because of a last-minute stem change needed to fit my bike into the airplane bike box, I ended up with handlebars that were too narrow. That led to severe arm pain for the last 50 miles of the bike. Then the last 15 miles of the bike were into a strong headwind.

It took me eight and a half hours to complete the bike course. By the time I got to the 3-mile mark on the run, in a hot late afternoon sun, feeling good but dead last and going very slowly, I knew that I would not be able to make the race time limit. Now this was the race that I had focused my season on. And so, was I crushed by the realization that I would not be able to achieve my primary triathlon goal for 1990? Would I be embarrassed to be a non-finisher? No, not at all.

I simply recognized that though I was trying hard, the goal of finishing my third Ironman on that day, on that course, given the conditions, was not realistic. Nevertheless, I was feeling good physically, and I did not want to stop at that point. So given the time constraint, I simply reset my goal, during the race. I would go out to the turnaround on the marathon and stop there.

Everyone was relieved, the highway patrol, the volunteers and the race director. The internal pressure was off me. I proceeded to have a wonderful time. I stopped at each aid station, told the volunteers what a great job they were doing and assured them that they would not have to wait for me.

I chit-chatted with various friends and acquaintances as they passed me on their way back to the race finish. And when the sun finally went down as I was passing the 10-mile mark, I was able to pick it up and run to my finish at about a nine minute pace. I felt great then, and still do. I didn't finish the Vineman but I did what I could do on that given day, and that was not insignificant. I was slow, but hardly worn out. I made a lot of new friends and enjoyed a tour of beautiful country. I got back to the transition area, in a car, healthy and happy.

What's the lesson here? Not finishing in itself is not a bad thing. It's how you react to it that produces the good, or bad, feelings. Often, you can simply reset your goal, during the race. And remember, there's always another race. About a month after the Vineman, for the first time in eight seasons of triathlon, I attempted a double on one weekend: an Olympic-distance event, the (then) Fithampton in Sag Harbor, N.Y., on Saturday, and an Olympic-plus event, the Sri Chinmoy in Misquamicut, R.I., on Sunday. I finished both, happily and healthily, in good times for me. It was truly a great season.

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