

KNOW WHEN TO HOLD 'EM AND KNOW WHEN TO FOLD 'EM

By Steve Jonas



You've started a race and something goes wrong. What to do? Battle through? Modify the race plan? Drop out?

Well, it depends. I had three different "something went wrong" experiences this summer. You might find something helpful in knowing how I handled each situation.

I have a tendency to get seasick in the swim. Therefore, I often take an anti-motion sickness medication before the start of each race. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. Like most of us, I am happiest using the freestyle technique. However, if I start to feel queasy, changing over to the sidestroke – keeping my head out of the water and my eye on the shoreline – helps to keep the queasiness under control. But, as slow as I am using the freestyle (about 45 minutes for the Olympic distance of 1.5k), I am even slower with the sidestroke (about an hour for the same distance).

On August 2, 2009, I started the Cayuga Lake (NY) Triathlon. It was a windy day, with rain threatening. The wind was coming from the south, there was a lake current from south to north, and the course was a south to north out and back. Thus, the water was a bit rough, and within a few minutes, I wasn't feeling so good. Thinking that I could finish the swim if I could just make it to the halfway point against the wind and current and then ride them back, I turned over on my side. I made it, but I was so far behind that I had a convoy of water safety people with me. I was thrilled to get to the beach, but I felt very wobbly. I thought that if I just sat down for a

bit, I could pull myself together and get out on the bike; however, by that time the rain was coming down. Wet roads, poor visibility and even after a break I was still feeling a bit unsteady. I decided that safety absolutely comes first. It was time to fold 'em. There is always another race.

Three weeks later, at the USA Triathlon Age Group National Championship in Tuscaloosa, Ala., the swim was to be in the warm (85 degrees) and calm Black Warrior River. No problem. Well, no problem from the seasickness point of view. But, as you may have heard, the swim there was for the most part "uphill." There had been heavy rain for several days before the race and it had been necessary for the river-masters to open the floodgates upstream. I made the turn onto the long upstream leg and felt the current. But I said to myself, "OK, you're feeling great otherwise. Go for it."

From past boating experience, I knew that the current would be less intense closer to the riverbank, so that's where I went, continually checking the buoys to make sure that I was still moving forward. I exited the water feeling just fine and headed off for the bike. Looking at my watch, I thought that I had been in the water for 62 minutes. "Not bad with that current," I thought. Only later did I realize that I had been in for 122 minutes. Nevertheless, I finished the race, slowly but comfortably, and qualified for Worlds in 2010. Know when to hold 'em.

Finally, at the 2009 World Championships in Gold Coast, Australia, I got seasick in the swim again – dizzy right after the start. I gave

myself a minute before I would call for water safety, but the dizziness started diminishing right away, so I stayed with it, turning on my side again. This time I knew that I had the current with me and indeed, even on my side I spent only 48 minutes in the swim. But I did not feel very good getting out of the water. However, it was a warm, sunny day, and I was told by a race official that I could take as long as I wanted before deciding whether to go out on the bike. In the end, I spent 35 minutes in T1, took care of my stomach problems, and went out on the bike. But being so far behind and not wanting to keep all the volunteers and police out on the course just for my vanity, or having the course closed under me, I turned in my chip. Instead of doing the full two loops on the bike and run courses, I converted the race into my own sprint, doing one loop of each. Know when to hold 'em, but modify it.

Will I always be right? Not necessarily. But I do try to use my own past experience, the knowledge that there is always another race, and a racing ego that I have pretty much under control, as guides. In 27 years, the formula has kept me both safe and happy. ■

Dr. Steve Jonas has been a multisport athlete for 27 years, is the author of *Triathloning for Ordinary Mortals*®, currently in its 23rd year of publication (2nd ed. new in 2006), and is a professor of preventive medicine at Stony Brook University (NY). His website is www.ordinarymortals.info.