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Wolf's 2009 Ironman Arizona Race Report – November 22

Personal Best: 8:42:21, 11th – Swim: 48:05, Bike: 4:45:18, Run: 3:05:19

In April of '07 and '08 I competed in Ironman Arizona but each of those experiences was on 6 and 9 weeks of training respectively, so needless to say they were 'difficult' races. This year, after what I felt was a strong season, I thought it may be good for me to continue my training into the Fall and attempt another race. Ironman Florida, Arizona, and Mexico are each in November and just one week apart from one another. Arizona became my pick for a number of reasons but it boiled down to a race that gave me an appropriate period to train, it would be warm (more on this later), and I was familiar with the course.

After completing my last build block of training in Clermont Florida I arrived in Phoenix on Monday November 16. Chuck Settles is a local triathlete and board member of their tri club and he was quick to make us feel at home.

Arizona... supposed to be hot, right? Well, this week the temperature fell to just 4 and 5 degrees Celsius every night and the daytime highs were only between 21 and 23 degrees. After training in Florida where it was still over 30 degrees Celsius over night, Arizona felt bloody cold! Even the water in Tempe Town Lake only ranged between 16 and 17 degrees C, perfect for 'ice-cream headaches' and sore feet.

The Plan (this was at least in theory):

Swim: lead the swim, win the swim, and put 2-3 min into the guys I'm most worried about,
Bike: hold the same or slightly more average watts than Ironman Canada and do so without as much fatigue as at IMC,

Run: Hold my pace evenly for a goal run time of 2:50 to 2:55,

The Reality (as it actually played out):

Swim: right from the gun I led the swim. I won the swim, but only put 60-90s into the boys I was worried about. 48:05 was a new swim PB and I can tell you for sure we swam more than 3.8 km,

Bike: consisted of three laps, two of which I thought I was in control but my power file says otherwise and hence my third lap was one of considerable discomfort. In the end I averaged nearly the same watts as at IMC but my execution was poor (in relative terms). My time was faster overall, another PB for me, but it cost me considerably,

Run: again, consisted of three laps, so each lap was about 14km. I ran the first lap in 54min and if felt really easy, this put me on target for a 2:42-2:45 marathon, so all was going according to plan. The second lap felt absolutely terrible but my watch still told me I was on pace for a 2:50 to 2:52 marathon. Despite how I was feeling I was still running well. The third lap is where my

pace started to match how I was feeling and I went from 3:55-4:05min/km to 4:30-4:40/km. I was in a world of hurt and in particular my feet and toes were in great discomfort. I managed a 3:05, which until IMC this year would have been a PB.

Overall time of 8:42:21 is still an overall PB for me. I lost 8th place in the last 2.5 miles mainly due to a mental battle that I was losing.

Race Details by Section

The Swim:

On paper it looked like starting on the left side, on the buoy line, was smarter. All the pre-race favourites (with their different coloured caps) were all crowded on the left side with the media boats and the lead paddle boarders. I positioned myself as far to the right as possible. I was going to swim my own line.

As soon as the gun went I took off as fast as I could and I immediately dropped nearly everyone (which was cool). To my left I could see just one or two guys leaving the main pack to move right in an effort to get on my feet. By the 400m mark all the media boats and the paddle boarders had to move over to the right hand side of the course in order catch a glimpse of the "Wolf Show". I was determined to make my mark somewhere on this race, even if it might only be short lived.

I led the way right down the lake to the first major turn (the swim course is a big rectangle). Once I made the final turn to come back on the other long side of the rectangle I put in 40 hard strokes in an effort to drop the one or two guys on my feet. It worked for a little while but soon I could tell that there was still someone hanging on behind me.

By the time I got to the swim exit I had only amassed about an 8s lead on the guy right behind me and only 60-90s on the rest of the big kids. However, a 48:05 was sweet none the less. I was wearing a Blue Seventy Helix wetsuit (which I have been using for three years now) made a huge difference for me.

T1:

One of my fastest to date, but Richey Cunningham beat me out of the tent, he was first to this bike. I however was quicker at the bike rack and I was first to leave T1 and get onto my bike. I had also gone to Target the day before the race to buy some red, argyle, tube socks, with which I cut off the toes to make disposable arm-warmers. At the last minute, while in the change tent, I made the decision to not wear them, which was a good thing. The next part explains why, but it was a risky move as it was not much warmer than 10 degrees C when I got on the bike.

The Bike:

According to my own plan I was going to let the main pack of riders catch me and drop me. I was going to ride according to my own power meter and stick to my own plan. In theory, if I was going to have a great race it would all play out on the run.

At the 10km mark no one had come past me and I was starting to get excited about the media bikes around me and the lead car with the cool digital clock on the roof. I have never been the leader of an Ironman before so this was very exciting. I learned after the fact that Heather Fuhr was driving the lead car. Had I known that I likely would have ridden even faster. She is at the top of my list of “crushes” in the “older than me but multiple Ironman winner” category (I have categorized my ‘crushes’ so that I can accommodate them all).

At the 15km mark, still no one around me, and we entered onto a long stretch of open highway in the middle of the desert. Just to add to the “cool” factor, a media helicopter lowered in, just off to my right, and hovered along with a camera keeping track of what was happening on the course. My GURU Crono was making me famous (for a little while anyways).

During the pro athlete meeting before the race we were all warned that after all the drama in Kona they were going to be extra strict about drafting and penalties. One issue aside from athletes drafting off of other athletes is athletes being too close to the media bikes and lead cars. I was starting to worry that in my first showing at the front of the race I would get a penalty for being too close to the media bikes. I was trying to wave them off but they remained very close. The headwind was from the other direction so they were of no help but that is beside the point, I was still worried about Jimmy and his crew of Officials.

As I approached the 30km mark I was still in the lead and I was going down a slight incline towards the timing mats and the first turn-around. Just as I sat up to find my brakes two guys got past me (I was a bit relieved actually... being at the front was a bit of a stress). This was ok, and was according to plan, but what made my heart really sink was what I saw next.

I rounded the cone and crossed the timing mat, and as I looked back up the slight hill I saw “the train”. Eight guys in a perfect row. They were right behind me. It didn’t take long for the leader of the train to go by and at first I thought I might just stick around. I would find my 10m cushion in front and behind me and off I would go. However, in the span of less than two minutes I had gone from 1st to 11th and by the time we finished the first full lap of the bike course, I was alone. This is how I rode for the entire remainder of the bike ride. I had to hope that my pacing was ok, my nutrition was ok, and that my inner Kenyan was going to emerge on the run.

For sure, on the third lap I was starting to “feel the love” as I say (code for suffering like a dog), but I was doing what I thought was good damage control. My power file was not as bad as I’m making it sound but relative to what I’m capable of, and relative to what it should have been, it was really bad.

T2:

No pee break for me this time (I lost 2.5min at IMC peeing in T2... well, in a porta-johny actually, but one located in T2... they have penalties for peeing literally in T2).

The Run:

Some days, when I haven't had too much fibre, or cheese, in my diet, 'in my head, I'm a Kenyan'. Since my diet for the previous 5 hours had consisted of mainly gel, gel-blocks, carb drink, and water I was feeling good (well, as good as you can feel getting off a 180km bike ride).

The first lap was easy and I found myself trying to 'hold back' and save some cards to play on lap 2 and 3. 54min for the first 14km and I was feeling wonderful. I was eating and drinking and I had even stopped to pee (I knew I would have to... I haven't perfected the whole "peeing on the bike" thing). One thing that really helped me on the first lap was noticing my parents. They had flown in on the Thursday before the race to surprise me on race day, and surprise me they did. As I ran across the second bridge I could see two people standing with a banner stretched across the road that read: "Wolfgang, you can do it!", and there, to my amazement, were my parents. I even got a little choked up. It was totally amazing to see them there.

On the second lap my feet started to really bother me and I could tell that I was going to lose several toenails on this run. I thought I would push through it. I was also now having to force my pace which is generally a bad sign. In an effort to make everyone in the engine room happy I started on the Coke and water routine and that certainly helped for a while.

As I came face to face with the race leaders I had actually made up time, but the splits I was getting from people on the course seemed to be saying otherwise. I made the mistake of focusing too much on splits. What I wasn't able to know during the race was that although my splits were not getting smaller from 5th, 6th, 7th, or 8th place (I was 11th off the bike), the reason they were staying close to the same was that people were dropping out of the race and at one point I was actually in 8th place, thinking I was in 11th. So, as guys dropped out, even though I was moving up on the field, the splits made it look like despite my great pace I wasn't making any ground. This is where the mental battle started and where the mental battle started laying the hurt on me.

On the third and final lap I was starting to give into my mental demons, and I was really not coping well with my blister and toe issues. It seems like such a small thing but when your feet are on fire and your toes feel like they're going to explode it is absolutely limiting. My pace was dropping, the cups of Coke never seemed big enough and the finish line felt like it was another 50 miles away. I too was having those classic Ironman feelings..."what the DUCK am I doing here?" (quack, quack)

Within the last 2 and 3 miles three other guys got past me and I let them go, even though if my head was in the right place they may not have caught me or I may have gone with them. Had I not given up mentally I would have been able to fight longer.

The Finish:

I finally made it into the finish line and after 100m of high-fives and cheering back to the amazing finish line crowd. I was so happy to be finished; I was in this terrible world of hurt. It was a different kind of hurt though. When I finished IMC this year I nearly passed out and I was

rushed into the medical tent. I had turned my engine inside out for that performance. In this race I felt like my body took most of the beating and I was just happy to stop moving.

Not far off were my mom and dad, hanging over the barricade to get a hug. Not 30 seconds later my mom said she had something for me. Out comes this cardboard cylinder, the bottom of which came off and out spilled water and ice, and then this beautiful, sweet, bottle of Erdinger Weissbier emerged. It was a bottle of their alcohol-free version, designed for athletes and health conscious people. It is packed with anti-oxidants, brewer's yeast, vitamins, and minerals, and it actually tastes like a great wheat beer. It didn't have a twist top and my mom hadn't realized this. I couldn't get it open. Within just another 10 seconds a crowd of people and even media had formed and like lighters coming out during a slow song at a concert, bottle openers emerged from hands all over. In a flash the bottle was open!

<http://www.azcentral.com/commphotos/azcentral/12888/10/33>

I was walking around drinking the beer and I even got stopped by the Police on my way back to my gear bags. I was barely walking so the Cop didn't have much work to do to catch up to me. Even if I wanted to run there was no chance of that. I had immediate images in my head of Eddy Izzard thinking that when he was a kid the cops should have been charged with "stretching a pedestrian" rather than he being done in for assault.... "surely assault is 'moving towards', says Izzy, "I was running away!".... anyways, YouTube it (ok, I couldn't resist, I went and got it for you: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHRAtUGiAyM>, if you're a child/dependant/student this clip is likely PG 14 so go get your mom or dad first)... it's hysterical. I showed the Police Officer that it was alcohol free. For a brief second I thought there was some novelty to being stopped by what appeared to be a female in uniform, but the novelty quickly wore off and I didn't have to make any amendments to my 'women in uniform' crush list.

Thanks!

I can never thank my family and my parents enough for their support. My main sponsors like GURU Bikes, Blue Seventy Wetsuits, adidas Canada, and David Bialkowski at Ontario Trysport, are each greatly appreciated.

The support of my colleagues and friends; Fiona Whitby was on course all day taking pictures and cheering, Nigel Gray has been instrumental in teaching me how to train like a real pro, and Sylvie Dansereau shared an awesome week with me. She was also at my home stay and she was out on the race course with me providing moral support and good karma (she had her own demons to fight that day on the course).

Chuck Settles was a wonderful host. He was our home stay and he made tremendous efforts to help us and make us feel right at home.

Finally, the athletes I coach and my close friends. Everyone has been tremendously supportive all year long and they did not disappoint this time around.