

CAN'T SLEEP, CAN'T TRAIN, CAN'T STOP

MORE MISADVENTURES
IN TRIATHLON

ANDY
HOLGATE



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me, and not a single day passes when I am not thankful for that. I love you.

And finally to Charlotte, Daddy loves you more than anything. You never cease to amaze me. Thank you for enriching my life in ways I never imagined would be possible.

And now let's get on with the story, go and get a brew, get comfy, it's going to be "fun and games".

I HATE TRIATHLON

It had been one of the wettest summers in recent memory. Earlier that day the rain had grated at my cycle helmet like fingernails raking a chalkboard. Yet now as the sun began to slowly fall behind the horizon on the first July day of 2012 I squinted at its blinding fiery reflection illuminating the rowing basin, turning water into fire. Or maybe the fire was just in my eyes as the pain and sense of foreboding that I was a failure consumed me. It wasn't supposed to be like this, it was NEVER supposed to be like this.

The gravel path no longer crunched with every laboured foot fall. Despite my mind willing my legs to lift my feet there was no response. Come on work, you've got to move, don't let me down. This means everything to me. Nothing, no response. Just more pain as my calf contracted, shuddering like a decapitated cockroach. In a torturous duet my knee throbbed and I was engulfed with a feeling of despair.

This wasn't the fabled Ironman shuffle, hell it wasn't even a Julie Moss crawl, both of those would have been quicker. I dragged my left leg in a slow, deliberate and stunted manner. To an outside observer it must have looked like it was taking all of my brain's capacity just to instruct my body to stay upright. I was beginning to resemble a zombie from a Tim Lebbon novel, decaying and falling apart with each second that passed.

At least I'm still running I thought, trying desperately to find a

shred of positivity. Just then I was aware of someone at my shoulder. It wasn't a zombie but another human being, one in a much better place than me.

"Keep going Pirate," he mumbled, his tone one of pitying encouragement. I nodded and grunted something positive about his performance as he quickly walked away from me. I focused on the heels of his running shoes, hypnotically watching the little reflective Asics signs just below his freshly shaven Achilles tendons grow ever distant.

Within a heartbeat I was once again looking at the torturous gravel that was grating the soles of my feet; my feet felt numb. I felt numb. He's just bloody walked away from you.

I stopped.

I had completed 21 of the 26 miles of the Outlaw run course, an Ironman distance race in Nottingham, England. The day had got off to a dream start when I recorded my fastest ever Ironman distance swim but now it had descended into my own personal nightmare.

I reached into the pocket in the back of my yellow and black sweat-soaked tri top and fumbled at the sticky packet with all of the dexterity of a lobster.

I ripped into the raspberry flavoured gel and slowly put it to my lips, inhaling its gloopy goodness more in a last ditch act of desperation rather than one of calorific need. It tasted so good, perhaps another sign that I was not much longer for this world?

I remembered the mantra of my COLT (City of Lancaster Triathlon) club-mate John Knapp. The multiple Kona and Norseman finisher had told me and a few other Ironman racers one night in the pub that "no matter how bad you feel keep moving forward".

If it was good enough for John then it was sure as hell good enough for me. I gritted my teeth and willed my body forward. In the distance I could hear the race commentator signalling that another person had reached their goal. "Congratulations, you are an Outlaw", was quickly followed by loud applause and cheers from the grandstand of spectators.

A grandstand that contained the source of my inspiration, the one small thing that gave me the desire and strength to continue when I just wanted to embrace the failure and quit. It was in that moment that I knew I would finish even if it killed me. There were much more important things in my life now than triathlon and Ironman, and given all that had happened on my journey since I last competed in an Ironman in fact it was almost a miracle that I was shuffling along at all.

As I approached the car park that signalled the end of the river loop for the last time I was aware of people applauding me. I raised a smile and thanked them but my main focus was on the man ten metres beyond them waiting at the side of the path. He shuffled his feet nervously as I approached, protective and concerned eyes enlarged by the lenses of his glasses refusing to look away. A face that to me still looked like the young man that taught me how to ride a bike, or who first took me running with him as he trained for the London Marathon, it was not the face of a 63-year-old grandfather watching his 39-year-old little boy destroy himself.

"Lift your head up Andrew, it'll make running easier." I knew as soon as I heard the words from my Dad that he was correct. He walked alongside me in the early evening sunshine, slowing his natural walking pace to fall in line with my running.

"I know Dad, but I just don't have the energy to lift my head," I whispered in defeat from under my sweat-stained green cap. A cap that I hoped hid my pain and disappointment. We had been here before, but unlike Frankfurt three years previously there would be no second wind along the banks of the Trent. That's the thing with Ironman, your day can go from dreams of glory to the depths of despair in an instant. I had three miles to go, I hated Ironman, I hated triathlon but most of all I hated myself for being in that moment.

Three years ago it had been so different. Three years ago I had been on top of the world. Three years ago I was in love. Three years ago I was invincible. Three years ago I had beaten adversity. Three years ago I was in my prime. Three years ago

I was me. Three years ago I deserved to call myself an Ironman.

Now I only deserved to be called “Glassman”, I was so weak that I would shatter with each impact that my body took. Now the top of the world was a distant memory. Now the love was replaced with fear and loathing. Now the invincibility had dissolved into doubt. Now I no longer recognised the shadow of the man who although he had the Pirate crest emblazoned across his lycra clad chest acted like a scared little boy. Now was not where I wanted to be.

I needed to go back to 2009.