

Sprint Triathlons & Middle- aged Moms

Kerrie Houston Reightley

When I told friends and family that I was going to participate in the Kirkland, WA Triathlon at Carillon Point last September, the number one question asked was: "Why?" Now why would that be? Could it be because I'm a 51-year-old mother of three active school-age kids? Or maybe because I'm not a swimmer, runner or cyclist?

Actually, I think it has more to do with the inescapable notion that triathlons are for an elite group of Adonis-esque athletes.

But let me tell you, they aren't. I contend that doing a sprint triathlon (half-mile swim, 13.5-mile bike, 3-mile run) is like being on vacation compared to what most moms or dads endure

in getting one or more kids (and themselves) out the door on any given school/work day. When I told this to a fellow mom (who said she'd never be seen in a trisuit) via email, she told me she was lying on the floor laughing. Naturally, she's my first recruit for joining me next season.

Why I Did a Tri

Several months ago, I was faced with the impending death of my little brother from a rare form of cancer. We were very close. It was as if my entire core shattered into a million different pieces of painful shards of glass. I hurt everywhere. Instead of withdrawing (as I desperately wanted to do), I decided to train for a tri in hopes of strengthening my emotional and physical core. I recently read that, "Things work out best for those who make the best of things that don't work out." Training for a triathlon was my first step in that direction.

Training

I started taking spin classes last June. I disliked them immensely. But before long, I started feeling the equivalent of a runner's high on the bike. An hour would fly by while I was in the zone, listening to the instructor's entertaining monologue and fine blend of music. Before I knew it, I had biked between 12 and 18 miles. I can still hear Susanne's angelic voice, gently persuading us to "Keep it going." And Tony, in his good-natured lawyer speak, rattling off statistics about the superior brain power of people who work out. Or Kevin, smiling grandly and saying, "Connect the dots, folks...It's not that hard...Train hard in one area of your life, and other parts will fall into place." I always left in a better mood.

Shamefully, I didn't train for the swimming or running portion. I had faith that four decades of competitive tennis combined with more recent years of cardio tennis, total body conditioning classes, and jumping rope would carry me through.

Fear Factor

Interestingly, my biggest fears had nothing to do with athleticism. A series of what-ifs kept me up at night: What if I get a flat tire? What if I can't get out of my wetsuit? What if I get hit by a car? What if I get penalized for "drafting" (keeping too closely to the cyclist in front of me)? What if people start swimming over me?

The Swim

It turned out that none of those things were an issue, particularly since I was one of the last to emerge from the half-mile swim (the equivalent of 72 lengths of a pool). This was due, in part, to the aqua-colored, anachronistic "wetsuit" I borrowed from one of my (alleged) best friends. She failed to tell me that it was for windsurfing in the 1980s. Let's just say it wasn't designed for swimming. It's probably more appropriate for staying warm and afloat if you go overboard in Antarctica. Needless to say, everyone swam past me, not on top of me. With my first breast-stroke, the ill-fitting wetsuit filled with water, and I felt like I was being held hostage by it. Within five minutes, I seriously contemplated asking to be rescued or ripping it off (and perhaps freezing to death). I decided to leave it on and fight the extra drag all the way to the finish line. It was the last heat of the day, and I was the second to last out of the water with a time of 32:41 long minutes. By that time, people were actually finishing the race.

The Bike

Once outside of the transition area (in 6:49 minutes) and on the open road with my bike, it was as if the entire city of Kirkland shut down just for me. Of course, thousands of volunteers and police officers ensure that the race course is kept clear and safe up until the last lone rider, or runner, finishes the race. And since I was virtually the only one on the road, I felt like a star in an Alfred Hitchcock ghost-town movie

(sans the tumbleweeds). Silent, scattered shoppers and residents stared at me. Others yelled words of encouragement. As I crested yet another steep hill (not quite the advertised "gentle, rolling hills" I expected), a young boy yelled, "Show me your number! Show me your number!" When he saw my number (and that I wasn't a duathlete), he jumped up and down and enthusiastically continued, "Alright! Alright! You're a triathlete! Go, go, go!" Music to a grieving sister's ears.

The Finish Line

I finished the bike portion in 1:03:16, exited the transition area in under six minutes, and caught up to a man I had secretly bonded with when I powered past him on one of the uphill climbs. When I told him I live on Bainbridge Island, he said: "Do you have horses?" I said, "I'm afraid of horses." And he responded, "You should be afraid of triathlons. Very afraid." We laughed, knowingly. I followed him across the finish line in 36:10, and told him I would beat him next year. When I later checked the online stats, I saw that I beat him by a clean 10 minutes overall. That made me smile. Especially since I'm not ashamed to admit I came in 563rd out of 575 participants, with an overall time of 2:24:48.

Triathlon Number Two

The following weekend, I raced in the Black Diamond Triathlon at the foothills of the Cascades in Nolte State Park. I beat all my own times by a nice margin. This time, I signed up for the Tri-It novice triathlon, with a quarter-mile swim portion. I swam like a seal (12:09) in my rented, black wet suit — freezing, pouring rain and all. After a 5:47 transition, I rode like the wind for 47:21; and transitioned again in 3:26. I came through the darkness of the thickly forested race path and ran full stride toward the seemingly illuminated finish line in 33:44. My second journey of the soul ended in 1:42:28. This time, I made it into the Top 10 of Tri-It participants (out of 29). And I came in second in

my age division (of two). Once again. it was something to smile about. And now I have two participation medals and some cool t-shirts to show for it.

Piecing Back My Core

I was recently in my 5:30 a.m. spin class, finally feeling as though I belong in this exclusive group of fellow triathletes and duathletes. Lady Gaga's "Paparazzi" was playing in the background and it made me think of an episode of Dancing With the Stars in which a reality-TV mom was foolishly dancing to that song. I looked down and saw that my new black-and-hot-pink bike shorts were on inside out. There was a white tag hanging off my left leg, not to mention the exposed butt pad. I felt a bit like that foolish sextuplet mom. But I didn't care. I was dreaming about my next race, where you swim out to an island, bike or run across it, swim back, and then bike down a mountain trail or some darn thing.

I later asked my Type A, pilot husband if he'd join me in my next race. He said he'd only do it if he could "win the race." I said, "That's such loser mentality." He winced, but conceded he'd do it if he had a chance to train properly. Won't you consider participating in one, too? I can't promise that you'll emerge a winner (in the traditional sense). However, I can promise that when you cross the triathlon finish line, you will feel triumphant (pun intended) in a way that you can only begin to imagine.

Is running a triathlon really easier than getting your kids (and yourself) out the door on any given school or work day? Maybe the answer is yes, maybe it's no. Either way, you'll never know until you tri.

In memory of Robert "Bobby" Jordan Houston,
December 26, 1962 - July 27, 2010