

Perspective (Continued)

When the horn went off for the swim start, I thought I was in heaven. The water was perfectly warm, perfectly clear – 100% visibility – and as we raced down current with the ocean reinforcing our effort and carrying us along, schools of fish swirled around below. The occasional kick or bump from a fellow athlete didn't matter; the course went by in a breeze. Perspective gained: even when you're working hard, if you can see the beauty in what you're doing, the work can be fun.

I exited the water with only 45 minutes on the clock thinking I had this race in the bag. But after I sped through transition, grabbed my bike, and set out to ride, the work really began...

Wind. Wind can be absolutely brutal, and I'm not used to biking in it. The east side of Cozumel island is totally exposed and flat, and as we completed three laps of the bike route, each time we rode north along the eastern shore we battled a headwind for about twelve miles. On lap one I knew I would have a rough time; by lap two, I thought I was going to flop over with my bike and die. The water stations along the course seemed to be few and far between; the turn onto the Transverse Road, sheltered from elements by the jungle, seemed to never come; I stood on my pedals and cranked as hard as I could, but I never seemed to go any faster. But then came a small miracle...another American athlete, perhaps in his forties, moving quickly, with the beautiful riding form of a seasoned professional, rode by, looked over, and said, "Man, this is awfully rough today!" Reinvigorated from knowing that it wasn't "just me" – that indeed, this was a tough course, I rode on. Perspective gained: I realized I wasn't alone on this course, and sometimes when you're suffering through a challenge, sometimes the "fake it 'til you make it" strategy works like a charm.

I like to run. Ditching my bike in transition and heading out for the final stage of Ironman – the marathon – to me seemed like a relief (perspective: when did the idea of doing a marathon become a "relief"?). As I exited the tent, however, all of my insides seized up. I was overheated, severely so, and no matter how much water I poured on my face, no matter how much Gatorade I drank, no matter how much ice I stuffed into my jersey, I couldn't seem to get my body temperature down. After walking most of the way to mile 2, I knew I didn't have 24 miles of running left in me. But then Sam ran by. I'd passed him on the bike course, down and out with his third flat tire. He offered to slow down and run with me, temporarily convinced that his race was ruined anyway by his bike time. In the end though, as teammates do, we both "talked each other off the ledge." I told him to go "do his running thing" – he still had a shot at getting a good overall time. He told me to take the marathon in bite-sized bits: walk through the water stations, run between water stations, and just get through it. It was sound advice on both our parts. Sam made up a lot of ground, and while it was a slower marathon than I ever dreamed I'd run, and an arduous one, I made it through the 26.2 miles. Perspective gained: breaking a problem down and taking it one small bit at a time can be your saving grace when you feel like you have no hope.

At the end of the day, the overall perspective gained was simply this: I finished an Ironman even when I was certain my body was going to give up on me. Sometimes, simply sticking with something that's pushed you to the brink of failure is an accomplishment in itself. In Cozumel, through all the trials and tribulations, I learned how to look at things rationally, see them for what they're worth, and overcome hitches and glitches that seemed at the time unexpected and insurmountable. I gained a healthier outlook on reality that is critical to cadet life and life in the Coast Guard. You can't always focus on a problem itself – you've got to get your head in the game and start looking for solutions, or you'll work yourself into a tizzy that won't end well. Perspective. It's what gets us through life here at CGA – I'm glad it only took me an Ironman to learn it!