

Race Report Ironman Wisconsin 2007

2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike, 26.2 mile run

I did it and I can't believe it. It was a dream of mine!
It is a long one! Relax, get something to drink, and enjoy my story!

The race report would not be complete if I didn't start at the beginning...

INTRO

It all started as a youngster. I don't know how old I was, maybe 7 or 8. I remember Saturday and Sunday afternoons with not too much going on. Sometimes a nap, reading a book, or playing with a friend. But I do remember being glued to the TV when two different programs were on: *the Olympics* and *the Ironman*. I loved watching the skill of athletes, even if I didn't know the intricacies of their sport. Their dedication, talent, and accomplishment were so inspiring to me.

Through out my childhood I tried a handful of sports...soccer, ballet, tap, gymnastics, and tennis. Swimming was the only one that stuck with me throughout the years. I also rode with my dad on both road and mountain bikes. I liked it but didn't love it. It seemed a little boring, and I was looking for more excitement at that time. Riding was something we did together. I swam throughout high school, enjoyed the team, the practices, and the meets. Near the end of my senior season the diving coach encouraged me to try a triathlon. At that point I had only heard of the Ironman triathlon. Usually once a year, on a Saturday or Sunday, the Ironman would air on television. I could tell it was a grueling race, and I didn't even know how long it was. But it didn't matter, as it was so exciting to watch and see the athletes finish. I told the diving coach: "Hello! I swim, and sometimes bike...I don't run. I don't even think I can!" Well, regardless of the fact that I didn't think I could run, I took the compliment and encouragement and stored it away for later.

After the swim season was over, and the weight started coming on, I knew I had to do something. Swimming is not easy without a pool, and it was winter so biking was out. Therefore, running it was. I started one day, and I tried to run to my friend's house, about a half mile away. I could barely make it down my street (which is not far) but refused to stop since (with a high and lofty voice) *I had set a record in high school swimming and I had to be able to run farther than this*. Plus, I really wanted to be able to do a triathlon some day. Once I started wheezing I started to walk and then run again. Eventually, I made it to her house. A few days later I forced myself to run two miles, then 4. That was the start of many years of running. God blessed me with a roommate in college who ran and encouraged me, and then a friend (Chris), turned boyfriend, and now husband who runs and encouraged me (and still does). I have never stopped running since.

Well, that was the end of my excuse! I now run...I wanted to try to do a triathlon.

THE FIRST

The summer after my freshman year at Calvin College my dad, Chris (a friend at that point), and I signed up to do a team sprint tri. It was super exciting as all I had to do was sprint the swim knowing my dad would be there ready to go on his bike. After the bike portion my dad then tagged Chris and off he went to do the running. We were the first team to finish and second only to the winner of the race. It was all very exciting! I was a little disappointed and confused on how we, a team, could not go fast enough to beat an individual!! I had heard that he was an IRONMAN completer and was just doing this for a casual “tune up”. I stored that away as a bit of information of what it might take to do an Ironman race someday. Doing the triathlon together was fun enough that Chris and I signed up to do the Reeds Lake Triathlon (another sprint tri) in Grand Rapids where we were at Calvin for our sophomore year. I remember being super nervous that I had to do all the parts. I knew I could finish, *but would I have enough time?!* It was not easy but I did finish! I remember having to bike and run UP the Hall hill. Chris and I finished together as we had committed to stay with one another, even though I was a better swimmer and he was a better runner. Wow! I was sure proud that afternoon as I wore my triathlon shirt into the dining hall that afternoon. I was now a triathlete!

From that point on, there has been no looking back!

A FEW MORE

Gradually I did more triathlons. It was my hobby, not something I only did with Chris. The next year I went back and did the triathlon by myself that we did as a team the year before, which felt satisfying. I also did a triathlon in Ontario that was a double sprint...something that was fun for me since swimming is my favorite. I remember running towards the water flinging my running stuff off and I ran straight back into the water for another go around (some might say of torture, but I say FUN). At that triathlon I met a few Ironmen and I talked with them. They encouraged me to try some longer distances and even an Ironman someday. My main concern was the run and I asked them if people actually RUN in the marathon, and they said that most do not and do more of a “marathon shuffle” since the race is so long. Hmmm...*I will store that encouragement away* and shuffling sounded better to me than running.

Time went on and I grew in my running abilities even competing one year for the Calvin Track Team. I did it, but it was a little bit of a joke since everyone was much better than me. It did teach me how to be a better runner and taught me perseverance, which I have used many times.

Once college was completed Chris and I were married and triathlons seemed to be put on hold. Chris and I traveled to Brazil for a short term mission assignment. We were able to keep up our running and even bought a cheap, old tandem, and biked a little bit. While we were there we happened to meet the race director for the Brazil Ironman race in Florianopolis. It was amazing to hear more about the Ironman race and what it takes. Chris even got a shirt from him. I did not get a shirt since I did not look very athletic, even though I was interested as well. I stored all the information away and thought...*I'll*

show him!

Once we came home from Brazil, Chris and I were interested in getting back into triathlons. We found a half Ironman in St Joseph, MI. I was nervous but excited to sign up, and geezzz was it expensive! We had to buy special clothes that we could do all three events in. The race gave us something to train for! We trained all summer, mostly at my grandparent's home. Almost every weekend we were there swimming, biking, and running. I wonder how they put up with all that commotion, but they were always supportive! Race day came and I was so nervous, I truly didn't know if I could finish the run before the cut off. Complete with no aero bars, an antique bike, and no wetsuit I was determined to try my best! It was hot, so I had to walk some of the run, but I made it! I did have plenty of time, even though there were very few spectators remaining at the finish line. I was thankful to be done and very proud that I had done half of an Ironman, but I thought: Oh gosh, you are telling me that I would have to do this race, TWICE! After I was rested I thought about it...maybe I could do an Ironman. My half Ironman time was 6:15. If you double that it is 12:30. That would give me 4 and a half hours to spare (before the 17 hour cut off) since I knew I could not keep that pace up! Wow, maybe it was possible...someday.

Chris and I started looking into doing an Ironman and I realized that we were too late to register for the Madison, Wisconsin Ironman for 2006. I thought it was crazy that it fills up so fast and you have to register online the day afterwards. Oh well for 2006. I thought I could use the next year to buy a new bike, run a marathon, and do another half Ironman. I figured I needed to run a marathon before doing the Ironman, since it includes a marathon AFTER a 2.4 mile swim, and a 112 mile bike. I needed several short term goals that would lead to the eventual Ironman long term goal. I knew I had my work cut out for me to just complete a marathon, especially while finishing grad school.

Summer 2006 came and went. I graduated, bought the bike, ran the marathon (4:11), and did Steelhead Half-Ironman again (5:46). Yes, I was ready and confident to register for IM 2007. I felt confident since I ran the entire marathon and I ran the entire half marathon of the half Ironman. That is what I personally knew I needed to have accomplished to feel comfortable signing up for something so big. Training from January until August was not easy and completing the events was not easy, but I knew I had what it was going to take to train and complete the IRONMAN!!!

So, September 2006 Chris and I signed up together. He was still recovering from knee surgery, so we were taking a big risk, but this was one of the risks that was going to have to be taken to fulfill the dream. I was elated that day once our applications went through. It took about 20 minutes on the website for it to be processed since everything was so overloaded. The race filled up in 2 hours. We were in and committed to Ironman Wisconsin, September 9th, 2007!

Ready or Not

The Fall proved to be casual training. We did not get too much into it until January came around. Thankfully, some friends provided us with a training guide so we knew what we

had to do before things really ramped up in March. The guide called for 24 weeks of training in 4 six week segments. Things did not get too difficult until June. Monday was mainly a rest day with some weight-training. Tuesday was a bike (usually indoors with a trainer) and a shorter run. Wednesday was a swim and a recovery ride. We had to get up super early for the swim (5am) and I called it the: “You really gotta want it” training day. Thursday was a run, usually a track workout, to build up those fast-twitch muscles. Believe it or not we needed those workouts since building the fast-twitch muscles was going to help us on the hills and provide more endurance. Friday was a short swim, bike, and run. Saturday was a long bike (working up to 5-7 hours) and a short run. Sunday was the long run (working up to 3 hours).

I had to set up some boundaries to actually live well during this time, since we were both working fulltime. No house cleaning and few friends were invited over. Our apartment looked like a dorm room turned locker room: Wetsuits, running shoes, bikes, biking gear, water bottles, stinky running clothes, Clif Bars, Cyto Max, wet swim suits... Much of our time was working, exercising, or trying to eat or sleep well. It is doable for a short time, even with kids I think. But I can't imagine sustaining the craziness over a long time. Overall, I enjoyed it while it lasted and refused to let the little things bother me, I knew this was only going to happen once. I wanted to savor the experience, even the training!

We did most of our training with Jodie Blake. She is a good friend from the Mars Hill Running Group. I was thankful to have someone to train with. Chris is my favorite training partner but I am not fast enough to give him a workout, so Jodie was a blessing. We would compare notes and learn from each other along the journey. Thanks to her husband, who cared for their children, we did many of our long runs and rides together.

One thing we did that was crucial to our success was visiting Madison, WI before the race. Chris and I went to visit his brother and sister-in-law and practiced riding and running the courses. We learned first-hand the sharp turns and many hills, when to shift, when to eat, when to rest. We tried to find a place to swim, but all we found was seaweed. Thankfully we found an elevation map of the lake and all the places we had tried were super shallow and the place we would be swimming in for the race would be deep. I despise swimming in seaweed, and 2.4 miles of seaweed makes me sick, YUCK!

Before we knew it, summer was ending...but hey wait!! Where did it go? It was spent training!! The ending of summer meant that race day was coming!! I started to get a little nervous and paranoid about the weather for race day.

We bought new tires, extra tubes, CO2 cartridges, *Team Hirt* shirts for our families, packed, tapered, and took off work a few days all in preparation for race day! We wanted to be as prepared as possible. Any spare moment I had was spent on the web looking at race reports, trying to learn from other people. A friend was generous enough to let me borrow her wetsuit...Thank you Cindy! Many Ironman friends provided valuable tips and hints, plus other friends were very supportive and encouraging throughout the summer asking: How are you feeling? Getting ready? You are going to do great!

The support from family and friends was priceless. They believed in our dream! They wanted to help us fulfill it!! We appreciated all they had done!

HERE IT COMES

The week prior was filled with excitement, last minute details (which we tried to avoid), getting extra sleep, and eating right. I was getting more paranoid the week before checking the weather and watching my step extra close. I had trained for so long...I didn't want to get injured being stupid or clumsy. I could not control the weather but I could at least check it. It was a little bit of an emotional roller coaster watching it change from sunny, to rainy, and back to sunny...but I could not help myself. We left on Thursday and spent the night with Chris' parents on the way to Madison. Rob and Jodie did as well, and that is when it really sunk in that we were super close...Oh boy!! Friday was filled with driving to Madison, registering, and the athlete's dinner and info meeting. It was fun to register and get all the stuff. I tried to listen to all the details shared so I wouldn't miss anything. Mistakes are inevitable, but some can be avoided. We took a short run which felt OK, but not great. I was thankful that our training guide told us that feeling sluggish is fine as it is the body's reaction to finally absorbing all the training from the past months. I was also eating everything in site the past few days. I think my body knew what was coming (since I had to explain to so many of what an Ironman triathlon is) and was preparing itself by storing energy. I think my body also knew what was coming as two days before the race I started to have diarrhea...oh boy! That usually only happens to me the night before or the morning of a race. At the Athletes meeting we met Landon, a Hawaiian. He had raced the Ironman in Hawaii, is 21, and was there all alone...so we talked with him and invited him to come over the next evening. It was cool to meet him and be inspired by him!

Before we could think it was Saturday, the day before the race. My goal was to only do what was necessary and then rest the remainder of the time. We got our transition and special needs bags together and took our bikes and bags to the Monona Terrace. It was easier than I thought and I felt pretty calm until I started to panic since my parents wanted to walk around (I would be exercising all day the next day) and I needed to get back and rest. Chris and I took a quick dip in the lake to see what it was like and that provided an opportunity to calm the nerves. It wasn't as clean as I would prefer but it wasn't nasty either. Thankfully, no seaweed. Visually, the swim course looked long but I forced myself to trust the training that I had done.

The rest of the day I rested and ate. We had our families over to Brian and Lindsey Hirt's apartment that evening for a spaghetti dinner and team meeting. Landon came and that was fun! I kept watching the clock tick towards 7:20 pm, my bedtime. Amazingly, I was ready for it! I was tired from all the details from the previous days. We kissed our families good-bye and went to bed, knowing that we would awake on race day around 4:15am. Amazingly, I fell asleep!

RACE DAY

Thankfully we awoke on-time, as this is not a day to sleep in. I was so happy as I awoke that I announced to Chris that we had made it to race day, HEALTHY, and with no injuries! I have heard that making it to race day healthy is a huge accomplishment of its own. Chris's dad and brother joined us that morning. I was so thankful they were willing to carry my bags and be calm companions. All the nerves and stimulation (noise, people, and movement) overwhelmed me so that I could not think straight. Thankful again, we found potties, pumped up our tires, checked our bags one last time, and started the process of body marking (my number 2027, Chris' 401) and putting on our wetsuits. Chris and his dad, John, made sure the velcro was covered on my wetsuit so I did not get a nice raw "kiss" on my neck during the swim. Before we knew it we HAD to start walking to the chute where we would exit the water. Everyone had to walk through a narrow chute so their race chip would be triggered. Chris and I made a brief mistake as we were in the middle of the "herd of penguins" as we realized we were still clinging to our bags with our morning clothes. We had to back track and put them in the bins...I was not going to swim with it. At this point the national anthem was being sung and everything came to a halt. As the song was finishing I thought, *I will be brave today!* Back in line, I was getting very nervous as there were many people waiting to get to the start and we were not even close yet. The announcer was trying to get people into the water before the start. People started pushing and that made me almost hyperventilate. Thankfully, Chris was there and his presence kept me moderately calm. I was also a little emotional as we were shimmying along the side and I was afraid I would not get to see my parents. Suddenly, we were face-to-face with them! I really wanted to see them before I started but there was no guarantee. I was happy to get well-wishes from them and get some much needed love, hugs and kisses. Sadly, we had to keep moving though, since there were only 10 more minutes before the start. There was an emotional struggle between staying and getting more support, and preparing well by getting in the water. Then, we saw Chris' family and that made me start crying more. Support from family and friends is one of the things I hold most dear. Plus, we were very close to the chute and getting into the water meant I had to separate from Chris. We had trained the entire summer together and I knew I would miss him throughout the race day. I was scared and excited all at the same time! We entered the water quickly and then it was a few seconds of... "I love you"... "Have a great time"... "Be safe"...and then, before I knew it he was gone and I was off trying to find a safe location for my start.

I think I was in the water for about 3 minutes before the start. Most people were not talking but I started asking people..."How fast are you going?" "What pace are you going?" I wanted to gauge what types of swimmers were around me. I warned the people behind me to give me some space, and I made sure no huge guy was in front or behind me. Three of the 300 Mexicans competing that day were around me and did not know what direction we were swimming so I gave a few quick Spanish phrases to help out those folks. I also found chapstick floating and thought..."great, I could use that!" I also wanted to check my chip one more time, and try to tuck it into my wetsuit so it won't get ripped off in the mass fury. Oh my gosh! I undid the velcro and I thought it had a

double back loop but it didn't! It almost sank!! I nearly passed out! Thankfully I was able to restore it tightly on my leg. Thank you God!! Then I heard Mike Reilly, the announcer and *voice of the Ironman*, say..."One minute to go!... I can't wait to tell you: *You are an IRONMAN!!*". All the athletes went wild, since that is what we wanted to hear!! Then a brief moment, and BOOM the cannon went off and just like I had been visualizing, I took off. I quickly felt the movement of the "human washing machine" and I was very thankful I started in the back, but I knew I would have many people I was going to have to move around. I mainly did breast stroke for the first 3-4 minutes. People were packed in like sardines. I saw one person swim over another person...the opposite direction of the race! When I looked up it was all arms, heads, and splashing. I could hardly see the next buoy ahead of me. I took in a few gulps of water and got a heel kicked into my goggles. Thankfully, it reminded me of the days of water polo with the boys swim team. I actually was able to remain calm, or as calm can be at that moment. There was no point in getting upset or frustrated. Before I knew it we were moving faster and faster and I was getting into a better rhythm. I was passing a lot of people, and really continued to do so the rest of the swim. It took extra effort to start in the back and slowly move up but I think that saved me from kicks and jabs had I been up closer to the front. Once I got to the first turn (the course was a rectangle and we had to do two loops), it was mass chaos since many people from the outside were moving in to edge around the buoy. I actually was doing breast stroke again since things were pretty slow and I wanted to see what was going on. I started to talk to people and tell them to calm down and just keep moving, since I could tell some people were starting to panic from how tight things were. My internal radar told me we over compensated from the turn and were not headed to the next buoy. It was hard to see because the sun was so bright. I thought...a bright sun...Thank you God for a beautiful day! Thankfully, I could see the rest of the pack just a little ways over and I would not lose too much time. Actually, my time was great! I was really happy, I knew my time was quicker than I estimated and I felt great. There was definitely a pull from the other 2,200 swimmers, plus I was trying to draft, and I felt fresh for the first time in weeks. I took things gradually and tried to remember to use my arms, since my legs had to carry me the rest of the day. The wetsuit was working great, no chaffing. I made the half way point turn at about 32 minutes, and I knew that was going pretty fast for me. I wanted to just keep things flowing. I finally found a pair of feet I could follow (draft). Some people I would quickly come up on and have to pass, others were swimming like a snake and were wasting valuable energy, and then others were kicking really hard and that was very distracting. Finally, I found the perfect pair of feet. As a swimmer you watch a lot of feet (as a biker you watch a lot of butts), and these feet were perfect. They were actually barely moving, and she was swimming straight. I knew it was a female because the feet were pretty and small. I followed the feet for almost 10-15 minutes. Thank you to those feet for letting me draft...it would be the only draft I had all day.

Before I knew it I was on my last turn, which meant only a few more minutes of swimming. I focused a lot on my arms, knowing that it would be the end for them. I had to breaststroke into the shore since so many people were trying to fit through the narrow chute again. I crossed the mat at 1:09! For me, that was great! I had been hoping for 1:15, if not 1:30. Some kind volunteers (SKV) helped me up the steep embankment.

Those volunteers were AMAZING!

I ran a little bit and found SKV and they ordered me to sit down and they stripped off my wetsuit (thankfully, not my swim suit), lifted me back up, and I was off running up the helix (a curly parking ramp). I vowed to run the vectors (the shortest distance) so I ran on the inside. Before I knew it I saw TEAM HIRT (minus my parents)...I wanted some love and had a minute to spare so I snuck a wet hug from Peggy, Chris's Mom. I didn't expect to see them there since I had seen them down by the water. I then kept running up the helix, around the corner, and into T1. I grabbed my bag, and went to change. SKV ordered another volunteer to help me and she came with me to a chair and asked if she could dump out my bag which I replied "Yes, anything!" She spread everything out so I could see it while I took my bathing suit off. I am super thankful to that woman! I am so thankful that SKV would be willing to be around naked people so I could get some help!! Again, before I knew it I had everything on (minus my shoes) and was running out the doors to get my bike. Spectators and SKV were EVERYWHERE (minus the changing rooms). I got some sunscreen and then kept running to my bike. By the time I got there they had it out and were holding it while I put on my shoes. I then grabbed my steed and ran to the mounting area. As I mounted I looked over the top of Monona Terrace (conference center and parking garage) and saw people still swimming. I told the volunteer "I should still be swimming". I was shocked that it was not even an hour and a half and I was on my biking and the swim and T1 was complete!!! My favorite part was over and it felt a little bitter sweet. I forced myself to continue to savor all that that day brought.

The bike began, thankfully, uneventful. I watched people lose their water bottles on the bumps. I had to stop a few brief moments to fix my aero-drink because I used new rubber bands. This was NOT a good idea...remember and practice this rule...**nothing new on race day**...not even rubber bands. This was a very minor but annoying problem, but something I learned from.

The bike course is shaped like a lollipop with an out and then two laps around a 40 mile loop and then back.

I felt good on the out. I was averaging about 18 mph. I could tell there was little to no wind and I wanted to take advantage of it. I was always trying to ride the balance of not going too fast where I would bonk, but fast enough to take advantage of no wind and feeling good. On the way out there were several inclines and I thought...just wait until you are riding home and you can go down all of these. Remaining thankful and thinking positive was a helpful motivator. I saw lots of people pass me. Many people start the bike too fast and I did not want to make that mistake. Before I knew it I was at Mt. Horeb and I was riding and suddenly I heard: She's here, She's here!! Go Becca! You are doing great! All these people were wearing shirts that said my name!! I quickly realized they were cheering for a girl next to me! But it was motivating to be to be cheered for, especially by your name, even if it was not directed towards me!

At that point I was ready to see Team Hirt. I kept looking for them from the start

wondering where they would be. This also gave me something to do. I had recommended a spot by the 5 rollers and hoped they would be there. I rode hard towards those hills wanting to get them over with and see my team! On the second hill I shifted too late and my chain fell off. I had dealt with this before so I quickly hopped off, put it on, and was determined to NOT walk up the hill. I was able to start riding again and I thought... I am NOT going to let this get me down- this is not a big deal-I am thankful it is not worse. As I came closer and closer to the recommended spot I thought...will they be there?? I came over the final crest and could see a car about a mile away. Two people were by it. I was too far to distinguish if it was them, and I was still enjoying the scenery and other athletes. Then, I realized it *was* them, about ¼ mile away but they did not see me so I started yelling..."Mom, Dad, it's me! It's me!!" Finally, they saw me and were surprised. We had a quick 20 second exchange: "How are you? Doing well...16.5 average..how is Chris?" My dad told me he was top 200! I was happy for him! I wish I could be that fast, but I was happy for him! My mom kept yelling, and I could hear her cheer for me, so I waved as I rode further and further away. I knew I would probably not see them for another 40 miles.

So on I went, a few more rollers, then a HUGE decline that we had earned. Then came a flat section (Cross Plains) where there was an aid station, so I went to the bathroom. I knew what was coming...three HUGE hills, I didn't want to have to go to the bathroom there. The food was put away and I concentrated on getting up those hills. There were lots of spectators along the hills. The first hill had a lady with a drum, and I liked that. The second hill had...TEAM HIRT...there they were! And there they went...it was a brief moment of encouragement, but I appreciated their signs and smiled when I saw them suddenly jump up and start cheering! I wanted to stop and talk...but I was not even half way yet and I needed to keep going. The third hill was the worst. It seemed to never end. I appreciated that there were several encouraging people that cheered for me. It really kept me going. All the hills seemed to have people at the top that liked to tell you (while sitting in their chairs) that you had made it to the top. I was thankful to hear it!

At one point I saw something I will never forget: a young woman holding a sign in the middle of the bike course that read..."*I'd still be swimming!*" It cracked me up on the inside. Thanks again Mom and Dad for all the swim lessons and swim team practices. The swim was a breeze for me!

At the top of the last hill I remember thinking...Verona, here I come. It was the half way point and I was looking forward to going through the crowds and then getting my special needs bag not too long after. I continued to thank God for the things I saw and felt. I prayed for Chris as well.

I zoomed through Verona and before I knew it I was at special needs. At that point I was cruising along at 16.5 mph average. I stopped, went to the bathroom in a corn field (desperate), and ate some chips. I had frozen some coke and it was still slushy. I exchanged water bottles and socks, and then I knew I needed to get back on the bike. THANKFULLY, so far no flats! By the time I got rolling and I looked at the odometer I realized that the break I took (I think about 3-4 minutes), cost me about one mph loss,

and I never could regain that the rest of the race. I tried to get it back up there but then I knew I was working too hard. I still had to do the rollers, the 3 huge hills, and at least one big hill on the way back to Madison. I HAD to save energy. Plus, I knew I had a run coming as well.

I tried to eat but really didn't feel like it. For me, Ensure helped a lot, it was quick calories. I had not done a very good job of calculating how many calories I had already eaten, so I was taking in a little too much and I didn't realize it...but compared to the amount of food I had with me, it looked like I was not eating enough. I had been eating A LOT the last few days and I was afraid of being hungry on the bike so I took extra food. I knew one of the secrets to a good marathon in the Ironman is eating enough on the bike, and I wanted to make sure I did that well. So for a few miles I felt a little sick, and almost for the rest of the ride I did not eat too much more. I drank my Cytomax that I had made a super concentration of and then only had to get water at the aid stations.

Before I knew it I was at Mt. Horeb again. The entire second loop I tried to take it all in...as this WAS my last loop. I needed to use the potty another time, and I was hoping it would be my last, as it takes a minute or two off the bike. I wanted to get going and get those hills over with. First the rollers. I HOPED my parents would still be there. I knew they might not be as they may have left to go see Chris run the marathon. As I rode closer and closer to the point where I saw them before, I became more and more hopeful...I was so happy as I crested the hill. I yelled and waved vigorously because I knew that was them... the same car, the same two people. But they could not see me yet. I flew down the hill and as I pumped up the next one I started yelling YO-YO!!! YO-YO!!! (A phrase my Dad always used to announce he was coming or home from work on his bike). My mom started freaking out..."IT's Becca!! GO Becca!! YOU are doing Great!!" My Dad was cheering too! I was so happy to see them, I wanted to stop, but I needed to keep going. I slowed down briefly to see them for a second or two longer. I knew I would not see them again until the marathon. As I rolled away another rider said..."You sure are lucky to have your folks out here! It is important to have that support!" I told him that I was blessed to have them there. I realized I WAS blessed. Thank you God! Thank you for support, and loving parents, and so far no flats, and great weather. I had tried to control so many things...but I had been fearful for the weather and flat tires...so far so good. God was blessing me.

I made the turn away from them and focused my mind and will towards the last long down hill and the three HUGE hills to come. I had to get them done with! Steadily, I made my way and was thankful for the people that were still there cheering. I was starting to feel it in my legs. I could tell that my breathing was becoming more labored. One hill, two hills, and finally the third. I sighed a huge: THANK YOU GOD once the last one was over with. I knew there was really one more but I also knew I had several minutes of flat roads to rest before it came. I had about 25 miles to go. Then suddenly, I realized...IT IS ALMOST OVER! I AM DOING IT!!! I started to get emotional and I had to clench my teeth and shake it off. It was not time to cry! *Be thankful, not emotional* is what I told myself...I was thankful for making it through the hills...good weather, no flats, and feeling OK. I prayed for friends and family back home who where

cheering me on. I knew that emotional energy is precious. It can be used to propel me forward but using too much too soon could be risky.

I climbed a little incline and a little turn to the left and I was on the way home to Madison. WOW! The loops are done. Keep drinking I told myself! Keeping riding! Keep going! I started to long for getting back and off the bike.

I switched back and forth with a rider and he noticed my jersey and asked me about Wycliffe. Chris and I had specially designed jerseys for Wycliffe Bible Translators. Wearing it this day was like of a turning point for me and a physical statement of me stepping into the next plans God has for us. With a few words I explained who Wycliffe is and how we are involved. I don't know if he asked because he was interested or because he needed something to occupy the time, as it dragged a bit before we were finally back to Madison. I was happy to share with him that there are still 2000 languages without the Bible and my husband and I are going to provide counseling and computer support. At this point the riders had really spread out and so mentally it was getting more difficult. I was so happy to know I was almost back and I never wanted to get there so bad....Keep Going...Almost there!! But it felt like I had been "almost there" for a long time!!!

Throughout the day I would sing a song in my head that has been a favorite for many years. It was something that kept me going and motivated me during the darker parts, such as the last 10 miles that really dragged on.

*I will never be the same again
I will never return, I've closed the door
I will walk the path, I'll run the race
And I will never be the same again.
Fall like fire, soak like rain
Flow like mighty waters, again and again
Sweep away the darkness, Burn away the chaff
And let a flame burn to glorify your Name.
There are higher heights, there are deeper seas.
Whatever you need to do, Lord do in me!
The Glory of God fills my life and I will never be the same again.*

With about a mile to go I kept thinking, "Please God! one more mile, no flats!!!" I guess I was getting a little demanding. As I rode up the helix to the transition area I was so thankful...NO FLATS!!! Thank you God!! I knew how to change one (thanks to my Dad), but that did not mean I WANTED to change one. I can do it but not very fast, plus it uses a lot of energy.

I got to the top of the helix and I assumed that would be the end (since that is where we started), but wait...it was NOT. I had to go a few more yards. I dismounted safely, kissed my steed and was thankful to it for how trusty it was and how well it preformed! I was a little disorientated and panicked a little as I almost forgot to get the Garmin GPS

off the bike. I was planning to use it for the run to monitor my mile splits and pace. AKV was generous to wait and helped me get it off...then I was off and running towards T2. As I crossed the timing mat I thought..."Hello people at home (watching the internet)! I made it!!! I got through the biking part!! Thank you for praying!!" I remember looking at the watch and I was happy to see that my average was about 15.5 mph and that I went about 7 hours. I knew I needed to go under 8 hours to have enough time for the marathon.

T2 was fairly fast compared to T1 but I was not mentally prepared, as I had not been thinking ahead of time on the bike of what I anticipated having to do during T2. I received AKV to help me change. I was a little shaky and I don't know if that was because I was excited, nervous, or tired. Taking off my biking shoes and putting on my running shoes never felt SO good. I was out and running out of T2...my body was leading and my mind was following. I could not think as fast as I was moving.

Suddenly...people started shouting...GO REBECCA!!! Huh?? Who is that? I realized my race number had my name! It was no nice to be cheered for! Yes! I am going! I am running and it felt so good!!! (why? I do not know! Maybe it is because I did SO many bike-to-run transitions for training...and I was really ready to get out of my biking shoes that my running shoes felt like heaven.) Then...I heard familiar voices and I saw the red shirts.. TEAM HIRT...John and Peggy (Chris's folks were there!!) They were cheering for me! I almost cried as I did not think anyone would be at the transition to greet me! It was such a boost of energy to see them cheering and smiling and happy to see me! Yes! I am running and I am going to do this! At that point I could also hear the announcer shouting the names of people who were finishing...FINISHING!!! A second of doubt came into my mind, and I just thought...I have to run my own race, I am doing great! So, I kept running and I was really focused on getting to State street! I wanted to see the rest of the gang. I also wanted to find out from them where Chris was and how he was doing. My mind was not fast enough to ask Peggy and John. First came the aid station where I got a sponge...it was not super hot but hot enough that I needed some cooling down. But I needed to be careful that I did not get my clothes wet...or chaffing would occur. I also took some ibuprofen and started taking in sips of Ensure. State Street came fast and I was looking and then they saw me and I loved the cheering. It was packed with people and chalk on the street! I think part of me was a little embarrassed to be cheered for and looked at by so many people. (I could not have been looking that great at that point)...but I was doing it, an Ironman! I knew I needed the cheering and I would take all I could get. My parents were always enthusiastic! I could not help but smile each time I saw them, no matter how I felt. I remember Heidi telling me that Chris should be coming soon! I was happy for that information. Oh, I wanted to see him so bad. I looked and looked for the yellow Brazil jersey...and then I picked it out about a half mile later. Our original calculations said that he would be finishing when I started the run...so I told him, "I love you, go Chris, finish hard" But then...after a minute of thinking I realized that he was not finishing...he had another loop. He was going a bit slower and I was a little faster. I was sad for him, but happy that I would see him a few more times on the run. He was still doing great!

At this point I had to get into a good mental state. I focused on running and a continuous pace. I took my splits and that was motivating to see that I was fairly consistent at about an 11-12min per mile pace. I vowed to run the first half of the marathon, as I need to get into a good pace. I walked through the aid stations, taking water only (as I had drank an Ensure, and had food with me for the first half). I also walked a few hills. It was not worth expending valuable energy running up the hills, my heart rate was high enough (150's). I thought I could maintain this pace for the first half that I would figure out what the second half would bring. I really did not know at this point how long I was going to be able to run. I enjoyed all the athletes running and the fans cheering. For several miles it was confusing to think if people were on their first or second loop! I was passing people and that felt great! The run course was a double out and back so when I was passing people (probably all those who started out on the bike too fast) I tried to figure if they were on their first or second loop. I liked passing people. Most were slow jogging, and some were walking at this point. I would NOT walk. Not yet.

State Street was great again! This was at about 6 miles. I knew I would see the gang, and I figured Chris would be getting close to passing me. It was motivating to think...keep going, don't let him pass. It helped me have a few faster miles. TEAM HIRT was alive and kicking. They were spread out so I got several boosts along the stretch. I had to first pass them, go through a timing mat turn around, and then pass them again! I think my parents were surprised by how fast I was going. I kept talking to myself saying: Strong, Persistent, Confident. Trying to do anything to keep my mind off negative thoughts or any pain in my body. I kept pushing along, and then I heard Chris...I knew he would be coming eventually. We ran for a brief moment together, but I wanted him to get going, and I knew I would see him one more time (another turn around). I could tell he was getting tired, both mentally and physically. I wanted him to have a good race/experience. I wished I could speed up and push him but I couldn't so I just yelled and cheered him on as long as I thought he could hear me. I saw him that one more time at the turn around and he slowed to my pace for a brief moment. It was a gift from God to see him the three times on the course! It made the experience that much more sweet to get to share a few parts with him!!! I wanted him to GET GOING...and reach his goal of under 11 hours. I knew he could do it. I had to keep going as well. I needed to get to the half way point!

At this point it was the Ford Motivational Mile and there were posters that people had made to cheer the athletes on. It was fun to look for the posters my mom and dad made. They even had pictures on them! I could not miss those. The pictures were of us at the Bostwick Lake Triathlon. This mile went by faster than some of the others.

I plodded along and kept singing in my mind and talking to myself. Drinking every mile, and walking only on the up hills or while drinking. If I was walking, I was power walking to not waste time. This WAS a race! I was just racing against myself. When I was passed I had to let the people pass me, it is too long of a race to try to go neck and neck with someone for 13 hours!! Before I knew it State Street was here again. The emotions started rising and I had to shake it off again. I was pretty sure that Team Hirt would not be there as they were attending to Ironman Chris Hirt, who would have just

finished. I wished I could have been there to see him finish, but no, I needed to run my own race, live my own dream. Yes, I was trying to savor and remember I was living a dream despite the pain and mental exhaustion. I made it though State Street, and focused my attention on getting to the turn around, the half way mark. I briefly saw Brian and Lindsey before the turn around and was thankful to see them, I was starting to get a little weary...I don't know if I even smiled. I passed by the special needs bags and SKV asked me if I needed by bag which I replied YES!! PLEASE!! I was counting on what I had in there. As I made the half marathon turn, and registered my chip I thought of all the people at home. I also mentally blocked out all the noise and excitement from the finish line. I still needed to reserve the emotional energy. It was too overwhelming to think that I had 13 miles to go. Then, I got to the special needs bags, sat down, changed my socks and got what I needed. It was getting harder to think straight, but I had to take a minute and tape my toe as it was starting to get a blister. I think I had been running on one side of the road too much so the inside of my right ankle, and my right IT band was starting to hurt. Rob Blake, Jodie's husband was there at the Special Needs. It was great to see him but I was a little worried since I had not yet seen his wife, my training buddy. This was her first IRONMAN as well. I thought she would be right behind me at this point. I took off again, and before I knew it I saw Brian and Lindsey AGAIN! They even ran with me for a moment! I was so thankful as they talked to me and encouraged me! They told me I was doing great, asked how I was, and told me to keep it up! They even gave me an update on Chris and told me he finished under 11 hours. YES! He did it, and that made me so happy!

I told myself: "OK, this is it, Chris has finished, now it is my turn. I need to get this done!" For the first time in the entire race I really looked at my watch. I was wearing two watches (yes, what a dork!). One had the total time (with the swim) and my heart rate. The other had all my bike info on it plus was recording my pace for the run. I wanted to take the splits. My overall time at this point was around 11:07ish. I had forced myself on the bike to not spend too much time looking at the clock but focusing on my riding. I only looked at my watch to see the mile splits and monitor my pace. I was happy every mile since I had been able to keep things between 11:30s and 13 min miles for the first half. I stopped at an aid station and made a volunteer do a little math for me. I could not do math anymore. This gentleman looked smart. I needed to see what my time would be if I continued as I was. I asked him what I would have to run to finish at 14 hours. He told me about 13 to 14 minute mile pace. I believed him and felt like a kid in a candy shop: "Oh gee!!" I originally wondered if I would finish at all...then I thought if I had a good race I might finish under 16 hours, but I would be happy just to finish! The possibility of going UNDER 14 hours never crossed my mind as a possibility. I was not positive at that point I could accomplish it. I still had about 12 miles to go and I had been exercising for over 11 hours! But with this new possibility I had a renewed hope and a strong motivation to make the most of my race and to really live my dream. I also remember a friend of mine, Cindy, who has done several IM. She said someone gave her advice at one point in her IM journey. It was a simple question: "Did you train to run the marathon?" (Most would say: well, yes...) "then **run** it...don't walk. Don't get caught up in the groups or people who are walking. Make a decision to run and run." The rest of my race was focused on running and finishing under 14 hours. I had trained to run,

and so I made a promise to myself that I would run as long as I could. Along the way I asked several smart looking volunteers to do the math for me. I could subtract the amount of time remaining from 14 hours but I could not do the division of how many minutes per mile I would have to run. Each volunteer gladly helped me and it was always motivating. At first I started out fairly fast (11 min per mile) trying to keep a good pace because my IT band was starting to hurt more and I was afraid that it would force me to walk in the end, so I wanted to compensate for that time by running faster earlier on. I was really focused and no longer thanked volunteers, but just tried to keep going. I also switched from water to a coke-and-water mixture. This gave me some fast calories and some caffeine. I did not always feel good but mentally I was able to hang on.

I started looking for Jodie, my training partner; she had to be close, not too far behind. I didn't see her at the start and that made me sad. I wanted to see her, cheer her on, and wish her well! Thankfully, I did see her, and she looked well! She was with someone and I am glad she had companionship. She was headed towards the half marathon turn around.

I knew that State Street was coming again and I could bank on my parents being there for the last time. This provided a lot of motivation to just get there. And there they were! My cousin, Phillip, was also there. I was surprised to see him, as the mental fog had set in. He even stepped out of the crowd and started running with me. It was great to see him and hear his encouragement. My parents were happy and continued to cheer and I could tell they knew I was running fairly well. Once I left them and headed away for the last time I knew all I had to do is head back and get to the finish. I had to get through one more lonely stretch but I knew I could do it. At this point it was also getting dark. SKV were handing out glow sticks but I did not want one as I thought it would be distracting and all I could do was focus on running and finishing the race. I longed to see the mile markers and check my splits. They were continuing to be about 12 min miles! I was so happy. By about mile 21 I realized that even if I walked at 15 min per mile I could finish under 14 hours! This gave me huge relief and I was so excited and thankful. I still had to finish and I still had to run about an hour more, but it appeared possible. Many spectators would say: Looking strong Rebecca! Rebecca, is this your last lap? I would breathlessly say, YES, and they would say WAY TO GO!!! Finish strong! Yes, I would keep going. I did not want to resort to walking. I kept myself busy between checking my splits, and getting myself to the aid station and just mentally motivating myself.

I saw Jodie one more time. We saw each other at Camp Randall Stadium. I am glad that I found her even in the dark! She still seemed well! I imagine she started walking but I think she will still finish in plenty of time. I was happy for her! I wished we could have run together, but we had to run our own race.

The last 3 miles were like a dream. They were hard, yes, but it was like a dream. I kept going but I knew I was close. I just wanted to get there. Mile 23, 24, then 25. I remember three college girls banging pots about a mile from the finish. What a weird thing to remember, but that is the flavor of Madison, and I wanted to enjoy the race, savor the experience. I also remember seeing Frank, he was just starting his second lap. Frank

is 87 and the oldest competitor. He started doing Ironman races when he was 64 and diagnosed with cancer. He has done one or more IRONMAN races every year of his life! Go Frank, you can do it!! I had to use some energy to cheer him on. He deserved it! (Frank did finish just before midnight, with about 4 minutes to spare!) About one mile from the finish things were so quiet, it did not even feel like a race. All the spectators were at the finish line. I knew I had to get to State and then I would see all the people. As soon as I turned on State people were cheering... "Go Rebecca! You can do it! Looking strong! Finish strong!" I thought, "I have got to finish!" I was really coming to the end of my rope: emotionally, physically, and mentally. I was trying to get through, for a brief moment I was not really enjoying it as I was so focused on finishing. It had been a long day, and a long training season, and I just wanted to be done with it all. Suddenly, I awoke from the mental fog and I heard: "Go Rebecca!" For some crazy reason, I turned around. I had never done that for the entire race. Usually, with all the spectators you did not even know who was yelling your name. I turned and looked and it was my friend, Cindy, who I trained with last year, who shared so much information, and who generously loaned me her wetsuit. "Cindy! It's me!" She did not even know it was me she was cheering for until I turned around. It was such a boost to see her about a half a mile from the finish. I don't remember what she said but I remember her cheering me on. I was now even more than ever determined to go and finish my race. It was a slight uphill but I refused to walk. I was so close; I knew I could walk when I was done. Plus, this was it! This was my race. This is what I had trained for and hoped for. I had no plans or intentions of doing another Ironman in the near future so I had to push myself and leave nothing behind. I wanted no regrets! But the internal struggle to not walk was difficult, for I had been running for so long.

The entire day was filled with internal struggles, just as life is filled with them. God was there amidst every one of those struggles and provided love and support through SKV who helped me get out of the water and changed my sweaty clothes. He showed up through loving family who withstood a long day of waiting and then cheering with all their might. I saw God through the beauty of nature in Madison, WI, with its mooing cows and green hills. I felt his hand on me as I knew people were watching and praying from home for my safety as I swam between bodies, dodged a few crashes, and remained hydrated during the run. I experienced God in the dark moments of the marathon when he reminded me that I was not alone and he would help me through, no matter what. Despite the struggles, these were just some of the gifts of God to me on this race day, and examples of how he shows his love to each of us everyday.

The struggles were still there but I was almost there! I had this inner drive that would not give up. I knew I had to finish soon or I was going to crash. For the last few miles I had been riding the line between consistency and burning out. I had to run around the capitol building to the other side by making one turn passed the aid station, and then a second turn by the special needs area, and then I could SEE the lights. The music blaring and booming, and all the throngs of people cheering...everything I had blocked out 13 miles prior. Where is my family?? So much of my race was determined on the next time I would see them. At this point it didn't matter...I just wanted to finish. I knew I would see them eventually, but I hoped they were there watching. I had to get this thing done.

Everything was so exhilarating and nothing hurt anymore. Somehow I had something left in the last 200 yards and I kicked it into high gear and I sprinted and gained as much speed as possible. Most people were floating in and enjoying the spectators and I wanted to pass all the people I could! Spectators were screaming and the noise was almost deafening. Suddenly, I saw my family, they were going crazy, and so happy for me! YEA! I wish I could have taped what they looked like! It is taped in my memory! Chris was not there, but wait, he was right next to me! What? Wait! This is my moment, no, this is our moment! Everything was going by so fast. He grabbed my hand and we sprinted a 100 yards, the glory moment of the race, pushing towards the finish line. It was my moment as Mike Riley announced: Rebecca Hirt, Grand Rapids, (then he announced another name) You are an Ironman! Wow, that is me! My name, I am an Ironman! The clock ticked 13:45:03, 04, 05,...at 13:45:06 Chris and I finished together with hands held high! Yes, happiness is only real when shared. We shared life, training, and the finish line.

Usually at this point I envisioned myself crying for joy, thankful that it was over and that I did it, or crying that the dream was over, like post partum race depression. For some reason I could not cry. I was just happy and smiled, hardly able to believe that it was over. I felt just as one friend described: deep satisfaction, or assurance...”that deep embedded feeling of delight in knowing that God has been consistently watching over you with delight.” He had watched over and blessed me in so many ways, I could hardly feel anything but thankfulness.

The finish chute was crazy with SKV, and I could hardly make decisions, but I wanted to still savor it all by getting the right size shirt, receiving my medal, getting a finishers hat, getting pictures taken and greeting my family. I had done it, it was so perfect, and I could hardly believe it all. Chris was there with me and we rejoiced together
Thank you God for an amazing journey!

REFLECTION

Thankfulness was my race day motto. I wanted to be thankful and enjoy this day and not get caught in a web of frustration over things I could not control.

This race taught me many things, but even more it reinforced many things: I am an athlete. I am not the thinnest, nor the fastest, but I am an athlete. More specifically, I learned that I am an endurance athlete. If I could do only one more race in my life I would do another Ironman. I feel I am made for this kind of race: my body, my personality, my ability. I learned I compete well on race day not afraid to push myself, race smart, or stay mentally tough. Finally, I was reminded that God is in control of all things...even our dreams of an Ironman. It was not by my power alone but by his will and strength that I was able to do it!

Yes, Chris and I want to do another. I would be selfish to do another next year. It is not cheap and time is limited. Before I die I hope to do another as I truly loved it. I think I would do one or two every year if I was living for myself. But I am not living for me, but for Christ and he has plans for me that are not an Ironman in 2008.

To those of you who think I am crazy for doing this race, then I love crazy!

To those of you who have a desire to do this some day...**YOU CAN! It IS possible.**
Small goals lead to big accomplishments! Keep moving forward and you will make it!

Thank you to you...for reading this...you have read a special part of my life.

Thank you to my family: for loving and encouraging me through words and action. You all believed in me when others did not!

Thank you to the MHRG! I love you guys! You have shown me that No One Runs Alone! Keeping Running and reflecting Christ!!

Thank you to Chris...for seeing me as an athlete and living the dream with me! You will always be my favorite partner for laps around Reeds and living life.

Until the next race report...love and peace to you.