

# A Long Day Outdoors: Mental Conditioning for Ironman Triathlons

July 17, 2011 By Will Murray

*“Sixteen hours is a long time and you can live a lifetime in that span.”*



Long-course and Ironman-distance triathlons are very long events, 70.3 and 140.6 miles long, respectively. And they take a long time to finish. The world record Ironman time is about eight hours, and the cutoff time is 17 hours. It's a long day out for everyone on the race course. An Ironman starts at 7 A.M. and triathletes are still coming in right up to the last minute—at *midnight*. The training time leading up to an Ironman or long course race also really adds up. Many triathletes dedicate a year of training for an Ironman. Eight to 17 hours is a long time to race, and a year is a long time to train.

During your training and racing period, you will have many opportunities to cave in. Caving—giving in to that internal chatter that wants you to stop, or reduce your effort, or shift your focus to something else—is a common experience that all long-distance triathletes face. You are zipping along in a training ride, and at the 60-mile mark of your ride, you do the math, *“Hmmm, 60 down, only 70 more miles to go on this ride.”*

Then a voice in your head starts in:

*“Gee, we’ve been out here three and a half hours already. I’m tired. My legs are starting to feel like lead again. 70 more miles. That’s four more hours. Is that a thunderstorm coming? Hey, I have an idea! Let’s pack it in for the day and do this workout tomorrow. Yeah, that’s it.”*

*Besides, you have a bunch of phone calls to return and the emails are really piling up and all that yard work waiting for you. Good, let’s head for home, whaddya say?”*

Does this sound familiar? It's that part of you that wants to cave in.

How do you maintain your focus and your resolve during this training and racing time and resist the temptation to cave?

Two practices can help bolster your resolve and maintain your determination to do what you must do. First, realizing what your event is truly like will help you focus your expectations. Second, practicing your responses during your training sessions will prepare you for your race day experience.

### **Step 1. Know this: Ironman is Hard**

There is a reason they don't call it Donut Man. Orienting to the magnitude and difficulty of the goal is the first step in gaining a useful perspective to confront the cave.

*"Unattainable aspirations as well as unrealistic self-assessments typically lead to negative self-talk which stirs up feelings of anguish and apathy. Inevitably, these feelings will morph into diminished energy and a "why even try?" attitude. This is why it is wise to incorporate "keepin' it real" as your omnipresent mantra. It will serve you well as you proceed on your journey."*

Know going into your Ironman or long-course journey (training, racing and recovering) is going to be taxing. Your training and racing will be difficult, and for these distances, difficult is *normal*. It is *realistic*. It's what you signed up for, voluntarily. When you get clear on why you are doing it, you can do the mental reward-return calculus.

### **Step 2. Reorient to Your Goals**

When you registered for the race, at least one part of you had images of great things in your mind's eye. Seeing the finish line, the cheering crowds, maybe even your spot on the podium are the kinds of images that make you want to compete in a long triathlon. Maybe you imagined the accolades of your friends, the amazing shape you will be in, the medal around your neck. When you recall these images, you can refocus on the "WHY" of it all.

Articulating clear goals in writing is key to keeping your determination through the training and racing journey. Come race day, another realization common to long-distance triathletes comes in: the cyclical nature of a long race.

### **Step 3. Let the Wheel Roll**

Professional triathlete Angela Naeth talks about her experience at the Leadman triathlon, a 250 km race, *"I learned that it's very much a mental game. I had some extreme highs and lows, but they always seemed to come around in a complete circle."*

Triathlon legend and Ironman World Champion Chris McCormack describes Ironman-distance triathlons as a big circle that rolls throughout the race.

At the start, you are full of adrenaline and your muscles are packed with glycogen. You are rested and trained and healthy and have been waiting and working for this moment for months, at least. You are at the top of the wheel and you feel wonderful.

As the race goes on, the circle at some point will drop a bit. You don't feel quite so wonderful. Maybe you swallowed a bit of water or absorbed a kick to the side in the swim, or your legs are a bit heavy. You might start to wonder what this all means. You were hoping to be so fresh, and already this dead-legs feeling is creeping in.

The race goes on more, and now the circle has dropped to the bottom. You are hungry, you are tired, you are bored and you have niggling pains here and there. Maybe some of those pains are more than merely niggling. You wonder who invented triathlon anyway. Who thought this was a good idea? Did I think this was a good idea? I could be having pancakes with butter and syrup somewhere, but instead I'm out here suffering. What on earth ever got into me? This is all just crazy. I must be some kind of idiot.

But then, somehow, the circle rolls again, and it starts coming up. Maybe you really are feeling a bit better. That stitch in your side, hey, you just noticed it's gone. Maybe that last gel just kicked in. This isn't so bad after all. Sure, I'm still in the thick of it, but I did after all sign up for this voluntarily, and I have been training and preparing for a long time. I don't feel great, but I am feeling much better, and I like the trend. This is actually pretty great that I'm here in this event, by golly I'm racing and hey all those spectators are cheering and smiling.

And the circle rolls again and you are back that the top. You feel great, even though you are working really hard. Things have come back together. You can hardly imagine doing anything else. This is a blast. You can hardly believe your great good fortune to be able to do this triathlon, to be one of the tiniest of fractions of a percentage of those people in the world who have ever done this. All your planning and training and preparation and fueling are paying off. Life is pretty wonderful.

And then the circle rolls again, and maybe you don't feel so great after all...

If we could call this the Macca Cycle, named after Chris McCormack's common nickname, it's a useful concept for long races. During a half-ironman or full ironman distance race, you may go through one or maybe several cycles. It helps to realize that this is *normal* and isn't a signal that something is going wrong.

You may feel off a bit, and say to yourself, "Oh, this must be one of those parts of the circle. I know about this. You feel great, then maybe not so good, then maybe pretty awful, but then it gets better. This is probably about normal. After all, I *am* racing 70 or 140 miles, and it's okay for a human being to suffer a bit with that kind of effort." Or you may feel great, even elated. And you tell yourself, "Hey, this might be the top of the cycle. This is great. I'll be patient here, stay on my race plan, and not get too giddy about it. And I'll enjoy it while I'm here. I am so glad to be doing this."

### **Getting Out of the Bottom**

*"Losers visualize the penalties of failure. Winners visualize the rewards of success." Rob Gilbert*

Beyond realizing that the Macca Cycle is a normal part of a long race, you can do some things to get yourself out of the bottom of the circle. Speed up, slow down, eat something, drink something, walk for a minute or do some other change to break up the pattern.

Also use your mind. Make big, bright, close-up mental images of the finish line, or the faces of your spouse and your kids and your coach. Listen to the famous voice of Mike Reilly that's about to come, announcing your name and saying, "*You are an Ironman.*" Recall a really great swim or bike or run workout or race leg from the past, and see what you saw then, feel what you felt then, hear what you heard then. And keep moving, the incessant forward motion that long triathlons call for.

Bobby McGee, elite running coach and author of the wonderful book *Magical Running*, talks about concentrating on form. When things get especially rugged, focus entirely on what you are doing. For one minute at a time, observe a specific element of your running form:

- the 90 degree bend in your elbow
- peppy cadence
- stacking your shoulders over your hips
- your proper forward lean from your ankles up
- refocusing your gaze 35 feet out
- relaxing your shoulders and dropping your chest.

As McGee says, "*Concentrating on your form is the purest form of concentration.*"

### **Smile.**

Whatever else you do to get through the bottom of the circle, smile. This one thing is the easiest to do and begins to change the Physiology of the Bottom. Smiling actually puts your endocrine system into a different set of activities. Two-time Ironman World Champion Chrissy Wellington is a great example of someone who smiles through the rough parts of the race, and she does pretty well at this sport. American Ironman Champion Cait Snow smiles because she truly loves what she is doing, even when it hurts. But she notices that when she smiles, the crowds cheer even louder, and that makes her feel better. So smile when you least feel like it, and notice how you start to feel better right away.



### **Stretch the Time at the Top of the Circle.**

If the circle of a long race like this has to roll, maybe there is nothing that says you can't slow it down and pause it near the top. To stretch your time at the top, where things are pretty fine and fun and wonderful, try these things.

### **Anchor it.**

Identify in detail, what exactly are you feeling at this moment. Create an anchor to that feeling by experiencing that feeling and making a small gesture, such as tapping your thumb and index finger together or by associating this feeling with a word or phrase, such as "this is why I do this." When you feel the sensation slipping away or to regain it when it's gone, fire the anchor to get it back.

### **Give it away.**

When you have this really great, top of the circle feeling, imagine that you are spreading it around you to the other competitors. Pick a shape, such as a rainbow or sphere or the wake of a boat, and imagine spreading the experience of your feeling throughout that shape. Everyone who enters your sphere will pick up some of that feeling, whether they know if or not. Grow the shape to whatever size you need, and retract it when appropriate. Share the feeling to keep more of it.

### **Smile.**

Have you heard this before? Smile when you feel like it. Smile when you don't. Smile at the aid station volunteers. Smile at the spectators. Smile at the traffic control officers. Pretend you have a mirror in front of your face and smile your prettiest, most heartfelt smile into the mirror.

That's your race day plan for not caving in to caving in. But you have a lot going on come race day, too much else to focus on, to think about this. So "How" do you nurture your immunity to caving so that you have it on race day? That brings us to the second point: practice.

## **Step 4. Practice Your Response**

*"I don't think I was a fine game coach. I don't think I was a great strategy guy. I think I was a good practice coach."* —UCLA Basketball Coach John Wooden

Before starting each workout, state your goal and purpose for the workout. If the workout is about Lactic Threshold training, say that. *"I have some very hard sets in this workout to enhance my abilities at my threshold."* Then make a brief video in your mind's eye of exactly how you want your workout to happen. Now you are ready for your training session.

If you incorporate in your training session some race simulations, come race day you will already have a database of accomplishments to draw from. On one training ride, at the end of 130 miles, I had four repeats of a 1 mile hill ascending between 12 and 16 percent. These last four repeats had little to do with physical condition, but everything to do with being prepared mentally on race day. If things got hard, when the circle rolled to the bottom, I could always say, "Heck, this isn't nearly as hard as those four repeats on Olde Stage Road. Let's get going." This is like using a mantra, but to be effective mantras have to be grounded in truth. Your training sessions, properly focused, give you a body of truthful evidence to call out when you need it.

Then you can let the circle roll up, and ride it up like a Ferris wheel, toward the top.