

# Cozumel Ironman 2011

Let's just start this "race report" by saying that I've never written one before and I'm not sure I will do a good job- too detailed...not detailed enough...whatever. I know there will be a few to read it letter by letter, and a few to scroll down, pick out a few key sentences and then delete it and reply with a "Loved the report! Great job and congrats!" response. I fully accept and appreciate even the scrollers. This race was for one person. ME. And yet, I had the unconditional support and felt the enthusiasm from so many that I wanted to let you all in on my day and make as much of it yours as I can. Because anyone receiving this report had, in no small way, something to do with getting me to the finish line.

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Arriving in Cozumel brought one thought and one thought only..."Oh, holy hell, is it going to be this hot on race day." For the next few days, Nathan and I tried to stay out of the sun and each other's "space". He was nervous because he had only trained about 10% of what any sane person attempting this race should do and was well aware that it was going to hurt. I was nervous because, well, I'm a freak who will NEVER have the confidence before a race to believe that I can conquer it. At least this year, I was aware of the pre-race routine and knew (thanks to my amazing coach, Beth Lamie and previous race experience) what I needed for race day nutrition, what needed to go into each transition bag and how the logistics of the day would go. Prior to the race, Nathan and I mapped out the swim exit, rode some of the course, and familiarized ourselves with the beginning of the run. After a pretty restful 4 hours of sleep, I ate- more accurately, overcame the gag reflex- my pre-race meal at 4am and silently fought back tears (and vomit) as not to put any additional stress on Nathan. We collected our race bags and set out the door, hoping we would have some good things to reflect on when we finally returned at the end of a very long day. Jeff was there in the lobby to meet and accompany us to the start line. If you know Jeff and would like to order him for your pre-race comic relief, you can make a request on Facebook and I'm sure he'll give you a quote (payable in cervezas). Highly recommend it. He understands that everyone is preoccupied but was able to get at least a hearty smile from everyone on the bus. For that, Jeffrey, we thank you.

The START: I'm sure Kona trumps this for the sheer essence of what it represents, but the swim start at Cozumel is pretty spectacular. Even though the show went off AFTER we left, the walk around the dock to the start paraded us past hundreds of spectators and gave us a peek at the dolphins that would soon be performing for the crowd. With 15 minutes until the siren, Nathan said it was time to get in the water. I decided it was time for a complete meltdown. Totally unfair of me, considering how hard I had trained, to put this on Nathan. Being the altruistic saint that he is, he looked at me with his most reassuring stare and told me that I was prepared, I had put in the time and everyone else was shitting themselves just as much as me. With that, we jumped off the dock and hit the clearest water on earth.....into a sea of jellyfish that seemed to avoid everyone BUT ME. Aussies must have a genetic sting repellent. I do not. After a botched countdown by the otherwise flawless announcers, we were off. I got the crap kicked out of me slightly less than Placid, but I still got annoyed. However, I was faster and fitter and more the aggressor than before. I passed people, I held my ground AND I swam the WHOLE course. I understand that buoys can be hard to sight on occasion, but if you know that the OUT is marked by orange buoys, the BACK by yellow buoys and TURNS by triangle buoys, you have to deduce that you can't swim from a non-triangle orange to a non-triangle yellow without having missed something. And then there was that submarine at the turnaround....if you didn't see that and swim AROUND IT, chances are, you skipped something. Whatever. I know I did an Ironman. If an age-grouper beat me because they skipped it, I won't meet them in Ironman Heaven where law abiding racers go when they die. I hope they're okay with that.

Transition: I did like Placid's transition tent better. Two reasons: there were more people to help and they spoke English. I CANNOT SAY ENOUGH WONDERFUL THINGS ABOUT EVERY ONE OF THE LOCAL VOLUNTEERS, but I really need that sunblock-applicator person to be there and be thorough. I was about to step into a 6+ hour tanning booth and wanted to avoid 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns. With no one helping, I grabbed a stray tube and applied it to myself. One volunteered approached me. Me: "Is the lotion covering my back completely?" Volunteer: "Agua?" Nevermind. SO, turns out it wasn't covering me, but I only lost a few layers of skin around the edges. Crisis (mostly) averted.

The bike: I should have written the report sooner. I forget a lot of it. I think it's a self-protective coping mechanism. If I did remember what it was like, I may never unpack my bike again.....still haven't, FYI. It was HOT. It was FLAT. It lasted 6hrs 18min. Enough said. Really, what it boiled down to was a windy, blazing hot 10 mile stretch that had to be done 3 times with a 20+ mile "rest" in between that allowed you to recover, pee (on the bike, go me!) and mentally prepare yourself for the windy, blazing hot 10 mile stretch again. Coming off of "the stretch" felt like heaven and rolling through town was like being in the Olympics. Let's not forget the Utt interruption- that 10 second burst of encouragement specifically for me coming from Shell and Jeff near our hotel. Overall, the crowd LOVES you. And when they love you, you love you and the race. I got very warm and fuzzy and reminded myself to smile and take it all in. The first lap was good. The second lap was, actually, pretty great. The third lap was enough. And even though I couldn't imagine running a marathon, I knew that I had the training behind me and was hoping I would be thankful to be on my feet, doing what I love to do.

The run: Transition was smooth, quick and exciting. I looked at the sky, now cloud covered, and realized I wouldn't need my hat. I am a minimalist. I don't like things hindering me on the run. If it were socially appropriate and not a chafing concern, I would race naked or close to it. I am the Faris Al-Sultan of age-groupers. (Side note: the scrollers will have missed that tidbit so for all you line-by-liners, consider yourselves closer to me). As I started to run, I peaked down at my Garmin, worn only to tell me if I was going too fast, not to freak me out if I wasn't going fast enough. I'm SO glad I wore it. I got emotional and overreacted (SO unlike me) to the enthusiasm of the crowd and noted that I started the run at a 7min pace. WHAT?! Edged it down to a sustainable 9min pace and 5 miles in, I was having a GOOD TIME! The sky opened up and unleashed itself in the form of torrential rain, the roads flooded and the risk of heat stroke was erased from my concerns. Sepsis from raw sewage seeping into my blistered feet was somewhat of a worry but I figured that wouldn't happen until Monday or Tuesday, so I blocked it out. I remember thinking to myself how much easier this was than the bike. The final stage had begun. No more worry about drowning (except at mile 2 where the road was under water). No more risk of a flat. This is what I love....just me against me. Pure, unadulterated endurance. I saw Nathan for the first time and he was doing his thing like he always does. I was happy to see that he was alive. I was happy to see him, in general. Anyone who does this with their significant other knows that for every ounce of pain you feel for yourself, you worry equally about their pain. Just knowing they are still upright and not in an ambulance is a good thing. At the start of the first lap, I caught up to Nathan and he told me not to stop. I did cry a little. It's not easy to pass someone you know should be in front of you by miles. I reached out, touched his shoulder and kept going. The second lap was still fantastic. Past the halfway mark, miles started to slip by more slowly. I started breaking things down to "Janet" runs. For those of you who haven't met Janet, she's my running buddy... running angel, really. She has been there for EVERY step of my training. She was with me in spirit EVERY step of the race and I couldn't have gotten to the end without her. One more 12 mile "Janet" run to the stop light to go...one more 5 mile "Janet" run to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Old Sandwich Road hill to go, and so on. As the miles wind down and things start to ache, the pace slows and the urge to walk increases. The physical stuff is no longer the issue. You can handle the discomfort when it turns to pain. You can handle the nausea that says NO to every drop of nutrition you try to swallow. What you sometimes don't think you can handle is when your thoughts drift into questions of why you have chosen to put yourself through this and what, really, would change if you just said "f#\$k it" and walked.

What made this race more difficult than Placid was that I had answered that question 6 months earlier. I was in it to “win” it. I was in it to not stop, to push my limit and get to the finish line as fast as I could. Not as fast as a pro could. Not as fast as my friends could. As fast as I could on my best day, *which was today*. I had looked to the sky earlier in the run. I’m not very religious, but I am spiritual. And whether it was directed at God, Mother Nature or some unnamed higher power, I told the sky that it had done, in the form of weather, everything I had asked it to do. It had given me the expected ocean current and clear water, with no chop or swell. It had shown me heat and wind, within reason, to give me the challenge of taking on this specific course. It had then hidden the sun from me on the run and cooled me off with the rain. When the rain stopped, the day transitioned to dusk, then nightfall, sparing me that last little bit of strength I needed to draw upon in the final miles. It was up to me to do my part now. For no one else but me.

The last 4 miles were the hardest thing I have willingly put myself through. I can’t remember now the specifics of the pain- again, must be my way of protecting myself from remembering and never wanting to be there again....because I do. I understood the “Nathan” zone that I had seen watching him many times in the past. No more water stops. No more stretching. No more gels, Gatorade or smiles to the crowd. I needed to get the job done. I saw Nathan with about 2 miles to go heading out on his final lap. And, like I had done to him in so many races before, he came over to me for that last bit of encouragement before the final push. I can’t remember what he said, but it was what I needed. I responded with “I’m harelslmph woeusnd”. Fatigue induced speech impediment. That was new for me. Luckily, it was temporary. As slowly as the miles ticked past before, they were now flying by. My legs picked up pace, the lights and drums that had been there for the last 2 laps were brighter and louder than I imagined....and now they were beating for me because this time there was no hairpin turn to do another lap. The finisher shoot was mine and I couldn’t help but smile. The end was there and the crowd could see it on my face. They pulled me in, screamed me around the corner and propelled me into the final yards.

For the record, I had NO IDEA what my time was at that point. I separately timed each segment but had no real estimate for how long I had taken on transitions. My “math” had me at about 12:15ish. My goal, if I had to say, was “better than Placid, 12:15 would be awesome, under 12 would be a dream come true”. The clock above the finish line read 11:53. Um, 11:53? Really? It was a dream- a very painful, exhausting and labor intensive dream. I remember thinking about how difficult it was to get there, what a struggle it proved to be during training and how much effort and soul searching I had to go through to endure it.

But what worth achieving is anything less?

Thanks for listening, supporting me and being in my life. Most of you helped me on the day and didn’t even know it. Now onto the next chapter of life, whatever that is....may it be as successful and fulfilling as Ironman Cozumel 2011.

Kristen Dennis