

## The Highland Triathlon (a.k.a. Doug Stern's Race) ½ mile swim; 15 mile bike; 4 mile run June 21, 2003.

by Bruce Cadenhead

I've been trying hard to keep my expectations low for this triathlon season. Just to be able to train consistently at all, with a now 3-month old son and a two-year old daughter is a bonus. Although I have been able to train six days a week, my workouts are shorter than they have been in the past. Weekend bike rides are limited to two hours. Weeknight exercise doesn't fit into the schedule. My weekday morning exercise is squeezed into the time between waking up (after getting 6 hours of sleep on a good night) and getting my daughter ready for daycare. I'm very thankful to Jen for being so supportive of my habit and allowing me this much training.



My goal for this season was merely to keep in decent shape and do a few short races at something not too far off of last year's times. Of course, as my first race of the season drew near, I couldn't help falling into that familiar competitive mindset. This is the sixth consecutive year I've done the Highland Triathlon. I had a streak of five consecutive top-three finishes (without a single victory). At 39, and with my lightened training load, I started to worry about getting pushed back from the overall standings into the age group category by the younger competition. I know I told myself I wasn't going to worry about it this year – next year maybe, but not this year – but it's hard to let go of that mindset.

It didn't help when Doug Stern told my Dad (who's taking his Wednesday night swim class) that based on the entries he had received thus far, I might actually win the race. I suppose this should have taken the pressure off, but actually it raised the stakes. Despite ten top-three finishes over my career, I've never won a triathlon. As I get older, and more fast twenty-somethings enter the sport, my opportunities are diminishing. Now I had an opportunity and I had to worry about blowing it.

The forecast for race day was for rain, but fortunately the weather held. I arrived at the race with a full entourage – my wife and two children, along with my sister-in-law and niece who were visiting us. Instead of the usual hour plus of prep time, I arrived only 45 minutes before the start and then

waited another 15 minutes to check in (it's hard to get that many people together that early in the morning). I managed a little stretching, a ½ mile run and a couple of minutes in the water before the start.

I didn't see very many familiar faces at the start. I had no idea who I should try to draft off of in the swim, or how tough the competition would be. The race started and immediately swimmers converged from both the left and right, leaving me no room to move. I knew that I at least belonged somewhere near the front, so I kept swimming over and around the crush of bodies – fortunately keeping my goggles in place. Things eased up around the first buoy, at which point I realized that the first swimmer was not too far ahead. I gave it a little extra push to catch up and get the benefit of his draft. I was never able to settle into a comfortable rhythm, but at least I was keeping pace.

Clearly this was going to be a different experience from my previous triathlons. Although I've finished in the top three before, I was never in any danger of actually winning or even leading a race. There's always been a sizeable gap between me and the overall winner. Inevitably the gap opens up on the swim and then grows from there. This time I was going to come out of the water very close to the lead. Although I dropped back slightly on the return to shore, I didn't fall very far back. With about 200 yards to go I noticed somebody else passing me on the left. Although the race was young, I couldn't allow that without a fight. The two of us exited the water together, only about 10 seconds behind the leader.

Although I fumbled a little getting off my wetsuit, I noticed that nobody else had left the transition area by the time I ran off through the mud with my bike. The only one ahead of me was the lead motorcycle. Now it was time to wonder whether or not I had enough fitness on the bike to hold onto the lead.

The first hill of any size comes about a mile into the bike. I glanced back as I neared the top and noticed one other cyclist. If I could push it just a little bit after the hill I could open up enough of a gap to be out of sight and, for all the others knew, uncatchable. Looking back a couple of miles later I couldn't see anyone. Then, just as things seemed to be going my way, my chain fell off. I tried to reach down and put it on without stopping, but that trick doesn't always work – it didn't this time either. I had to stop and put it back on. I was still in first when I got back on the bike, but I was no longer out of sight.

I maintained my lead over 2nd place for the next few miles. However, during the long descent into Barryville, #16 blew past me. I tried to keep up, but I seemed to be a bit weak on the flat and downhill stretches. It must be the bike – it couldn't be me (and a lack of interval training this year). By the time we reached Barryville he was in front by about 20 seconds.

Oh well, I didn't expect it would be easy. It was too early to be discouraged, however. I still had my two strongest segments of the race coming up – the steep two-mile climb up to Yulan (I had been doing my hill repeats), and the run, which has been my main focus this year even as I've let my cycling and swimming slip a little bit. After the first little rise, my deficit was only 14 seconds. At the base of the big hill I was only 11 seconds down. Then, all of a sudden, I was back in the lead. By the top of the hill I couldn't see anyone behind me. I eased up a little bit over the last mile so that my legs would be fresh for the run.

As I left the transition for the run I heard the cheering as the next competitor arrived. Depending on the speed of his transition, I should have about a 40 second lead. Then it was time for potential disaster #2. My bare toes were rubbing so hard against my leather orthotics that I was sure I'd be limping due to blisters by the end of the race. I stopped to adjust the shoe a couple of times, but it didn't help. I briefly thought about going back to the transition area to get some body glide, but I quickly dismissed that ridiculous idea. I'd have to hope for the best. Fortunately, by the time I hit the ½ mile point the friction miraculously eased up.

I ran strong, but with a little bit in reserve, keeping my heart rate in the 170s but knowing I could push it into the 180s if I had to. I was very much enjoying my unaccustomed position. I checked my watch at the 2-mile turnaround so that I could see how far back the competition was. My lead was a comfortable 1:20, but it was not #16 in 2nd place, it was #8. Where had he come from? How fast was he running? Four years ago Doug Clark left for the four-mile run in this same race with a four minute lead, only to be outkicked at the finish. I picked up the pace a little bit.

I finally looked back with one mile to go and saw nobody. It was then that I knew it for sure – I was actually going to win this race. I ran the rest of the way with a big smile, looking forward to the reunion with my family who would be just as happy as I was. I crossed the line alone, followed two minutes later by #8. It turns out that #8 had both the fastest swim and fastest bike of the day, but had had lousy transitions. I gained about 1:45 of my two minute lead in the transition area.



I had one final scare before I could be secure in my victory. 5:59 after I crossed the line, a partially balding competitor crossed. I asked him his age group -- the 40+ year-olds started 6 minutes behind – and was relieved to hear that he was only 33. I had really won!