

My life as an Ironman

By Jack Smith

My job title is Senior Litigation Counsel at the United States Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York. The jurisdiction of my office encompasses Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and all of Long Island. I specialize in the investigation and prosecution of violent crime and terrorism cases and in ten years as a state and federal prosecutor I've seen it all - from a counterfeit money ring run by the Russian mob, to "honor killing" contract assassins sent from Pakistan, to corrupt police officers who were full fledged members of a professional robbery crew that tortured its victims, to a nationwide Jamaican posse responsible for dozens of murders, to vicious gang members responsible for the murder of police officers. Its wild stuff, often times lives are at stake during the course of these investigations. Suffice to say, I enjoy the daily and unexpected challenges of my work tremendously. In fact, one of the only things I do a regular basis that gives me the same charge is training for and competing in triathlons.

After playing rugby all over the northeast for over ten years, I started competing in duathlons in about 1999. A little over two years ago I started learning to swim (never learned as a kid, can you believe it?) and did my first triathlon on June 13, 2003. Like a lot of folks, I was hooked immediately. Since that time I have race in over twenty triathlons including my first Ironman, Ironman Lake Placid, on July 25, 2004. I am currently training for my second Ironman, Ironman Brazil, set for May 29, 2005.

Holding down my job in one of the busiest federal prosecutor's office in the country and preparing for an Ironman triathlon is not for everyone. First of all, its a good exercise in time management, as pretty much every minute of my day and night is accounted for from the time I roll out of bed at 5:30 am for a 30 mile interval ride in Prospect Park before work to the time I get home around 10:30 pm after swim practice. Weekends start early too, sometimes around 6:00 am to get in an early long ride in the event I need to be at the office later in the day to supervise a breaking investigation or prepare for an upcoming trial.

As a result of my career and my training schedule, if you are looking for me from January through October, the last place to find me would be at my apartment. For most of the year, it's mostly a place for storing bikes, wheels, running shoes and other types of athletic equipment. If am not at work I am probably on my bike. If I am not on my bike, I am very likely at the pool or out for a run. If I am not any of those places your best bet would be to try me at some fancy restaurant in the city with my girlfriend, trying to provide some small reward to her for putting up with my crazy life. Lucky for me, she is a super-supportive girlfriend who also likes to swim, bike and run, though she has yet to be bitten by the Ironman bug.

To live this life, it helps to really love riding your bike, running and swimming. During the peak of Ironman training you are spending 18 to 25 hours a week riding, running and swimming. The workouts include, among others, a 5 to 6 hour bike ride on Saturday, 4 hour ride with hill repeats on Sunday, a 2:00 to 2:30 long run Wednesday morning before work and swim practice Monday night. I usually take Fridays off to let my body recharge for the bigger workouts on the weekends, but other than that it is two workouts a day for over five months building up to the big race. Every fourth week I will lessen the training volume to allow for more recovery and give myself time to catch up on matters at work. Given the fact that I usually work anywhere between 55 and 80 hours a week, often times there can be a lot of catching up to do. In the end, you can't and shouldn't do all this training for the races themselves. You have to actually enjoy training for training's sake - enjoy going hard on your bike for 2 hours before a morning meeting with F.B.I. agents to discuss an investigation, or swimming 2 miles of intervals after a long day in court.

I actually think one of the reasons the triathlon lifestyle suits me so well is because of my job. My profession as a trial attorney is a highly competitive one filled with type 'A' personalities with whom you battle on a daily basis. I find triathlon racing to be a great release from the stresses of work. Instead of real world concerns like whether a murderer will go free if we cannot locate an important witness, it's just a race. Instead of dealing with terrible crime involving the worst things that people can do to one another, being involved in triathlon lets me see good people at their best, achieving totally positive goals.

My work as a prosecutor and my triathlon training also intersect in a lot of unexpected ways. Last year, for example, I receive a death threat in one of my case and as a result was immediately assigned a detail of United States Marshals to protect me indefinitely. Needless to say, that didn't work out too well. As I told one of the Marshals, unless the bad guys were prepared to get up Saturday at 6:00 am for 100 mile ride followed by a 6 mile run they'd never catch up with me. Another time I was began a three month death penalty trial the day after running a marathon. The jury must have thought I was 90 years old the way I limped around the courtroom during the first few days of trial. After another trial, I got a call from a juror and supposed, like many jurors, she wished to discuss the details of the case she had just heard. Instead, it turned out that what she was most curious about was not the case but whether I could confirm that I was the "insane guy" she and fellow jurors had witnessed running by the courthouse every morning two hours before court in subfreezing weather.

In my daily life at the office I have also learned a few truths that have allowed me to live my dual lives in relative harmony. First and foremost, under almost any circumstances on any given day, caffeine is your friend. Your very, very dear friend. There are many post-workout mornings, like today when I got in to work after doing a 60 mile bike ride that started at 5:00 am in preparation for Ironman Brazil; I would never have made it through without my dear, dear friend. Second, I've found that my colleagues don't really mind if I print out countless training schedules, race flyers and triathlon articles between murder indictments and plea agreements on our shared printer as long as I will provide them free counsel on all exercise-related topics from the best tasting powerbars to the best local running routes to the best strength training programs at the gym. Third, you can get in a quick workout you might otherwise miss if you turn your office into a mini-locker room by hiding up to ten pairs of running shoes under your desk (it makes no sense but I have ten pairs there right now), socks, shorts and workout clothes in one desk drawer and swim stuff loaded in another. Finally, I have learned that while I am completely fascinated by the idea of doing an Ironman under 10 hours, sadly, many of my co-workers are not nearly as fascinated and think I should seek help, and I don't think they mean help with my swim stroke.

In the end, to fit it all in I supposed you have to be a little nuts meaning you have got to love just being out there - on any given day, at any time and in any weather. To make it all work and to fully enjoy the sport, you have to be disciplined about making and keeping time for the things you want to do. That's probably the hardest part, boxing out time for the things you want to do, with all the legitimate demands placed on your time by family, friends and your career. If you can do all that, swimming 2.4 miles, riding 112 miles and running 26.2 miles all in one day is really no big deal.