

Find your happy place

Draw on experience to boost your confidence



By Jordan D. Metzl, MD

The bikes were in transition, the bags all packed. Water bottles were filled, special-needs food in place. All I had to do was go to sleep. It was 10 p.m.; the alarm was set for 5 a.m., and the race of a lifetime started at 7.

Trying to fall asleep the night before a big race can be tough. Racers have tried everything—counting sheep, drinking a beer, eating turkey for dinner. The truth is there is no magic bullet to keeping your cool before a key event. The best recipe is to stay calm, focus on the process and think about all the training you've done in the preceding months, which will get you to the finish. And put the race into context. For most of us, a big race, while an important personal goal, is a means to an end (in terms of a healthy, active lifestyle) rather than simply an end in itself. Keeping this in mind can help alleviate some of the pressure you may feel to perform.

Still, despite your best intentions, once you get to the race



site on race morning even the best athletes can feel intimidated and fall victim to self-doubt. For me, body marking is most intimidating. There is no cellulite to be found, and I often wonder, "Do these people do anything else but work out?" They are amazing. The truth is, however, that most age groupers have full lives. Last year at the Ford Ironman World Championship in Hawaii I met a dentist from Japan, an investment banker from Boston, a pediatrician from Kansas City and a fireman from New York. All walks of life were represented.

STAYING ON TRACK AT YOUR KEY RACE

The 2.4-mile ocean swim at Hawaii is significantly different from a pool swim. Saltwater is easier to swim in than fresh

water, and the water in Hawaii is especially saline, which makes for enhanced buoyancy—but also increases the incidence of gastrointestinal problems if ingested.

When the bike began, it was already 90 degrees. Riding in Hawaii for the first time is incredible; however, by mile 80 or so the heat and wind take their toll. But as I wheeled back into transition from the bike, the huge number of shouting spectators struck me. The intensity of their support was incredible. I also noticed the significant medical presence—medical tents and many medical volunteers.

In fact, the medical presence at the Hawaii Ironman has become a model of preventive care. Numerous aid stations, serving soup to provide extra sodium and providing sponges for cooling,

are among the many effective practices that started here and have since spread elsewhere.

Dr. Robert Laird, a pediatrician in Kona, has been involved with the medical team at the Hawaii race for nearly 25 years (and has also done the race twice). "When I first started helping out, there were four of us," Laird told me. Now there are more than 200 medical volunteers, many of whom come the week before the Ironman to attend a medical conference in Kona and then stay on and help staff the event.

When I set out on the run, I felt pretty good, but when the course turned onto the black lava of the Queen Ka'ahumanu highway, it all changed. The road radiated heat. Trudging along, I started to feel the limits of the human body's capacity for endurance and heat tolerance.

However, as the time ticked onward, a strange thing happened. My fatigue lifted, and I felt my body gliding along the road. The race became a race against myself, a push to find the ultimate boundaries inside my own body and mind. As I crossed the finish line, I realized that, like everyone who has ever had the good fortune to compete at Kona, the race is truly the ultimate test—and I also learned that, despite my pre-race jitters, by focusing on the training I had done plus my triathlon experience that had helped me get to Kona, I was able to stay sharp and tap into a well of much-needed confidence on race day. ▲

Jordan D. Metzl, MD, is a nationally recognized sports-medicine specialist at Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City. In addition to his medical practice, Dr. Metzl is a 25-time marathon runner and now a four-time Ironman finisher.

John Segetal/wahomedia.com