

Ben Neiburger's Patagonman 2018 Race Report

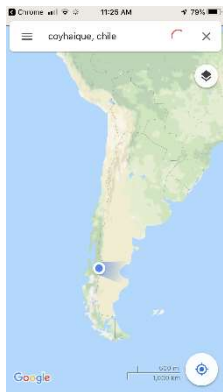
Should you take a second mortgage to do this race? Absolutely.

Can anyone do this race? No. You need perseverance, consistency and about a year to train (if you are a middle of the pack athlete like I am). Do you need talent and ability? Hell no. See above.

Why did I do this? Because it was there, I couldn't help it. Lani made me sign up for the lottery. I also made it about celebrating my 50th birthday. Happy birthday to me! It was a 16-hour celebration, triathlon style.

START

Patagonia is far away. How far? About 10,000 km or 6,000 miles from Chicago. The Latitude in southern Chile is the same latitude south as central Minnesota is north. The only regret I have about the whole experience is that I did not remember to see what direction the water swirled when you flushed a toilet. That was a bucket list item and I must go back sometime to make sure I check that box.



Coyhaique, Chile

The journey from Chicago to Patagonia involves a stopover in Miami, an overnight flight to Santiago, and a connecting flight to Balmaceda, Chile. The airport in Balmaceda (the village appears to be the airport and a couple of streets) is about an hour drive from the capital of the Aysen Region of Patagonia, Coyhaique. Despite my best efforts during our two-week trip (and almost a full week with a local guide), I still can't pronounce Coyhaique.

My main concern was my bike making the journey to Patagonia from Chicago with me. We already had a separation calamity as my wife, Barbara, left her new Title X warm-for-Patagonia jacket on the plane. We didn't notice until after it took off for somewhere else. A shop in the airport had a replacement coat she bought. Patagonia brand, of course.

The day we arrived, there were two flights into the Balmaceda Airport from Santiago carrying most of the racing athletes and their supports. I've never seen 150 bicycles packed into the bellies of two airplanes before. The airplane loader's luggage carts were overflowing with large bike boxes and nervous panicking athletes waiting for their bikes to arrive.

The terminal had two large rooms, one with the baggage conveyor belt. All the athletes waited in a large packed mass waiting for bikes to arrive. As everybody else got their bikes, my panic increased. I thought I lost my bike. I waited. 30 minutes. Almost everyone left the terminal. Whew. My bike came out last.



Filling cargo with bikes at the Santiago Airport

The race organizers set up shuttles for us to get to our hotels.

It seemed like the race organizers collected every single large vehicle in town to transport us from the airport to our hotels. They had produce delivery trucks, regular transports, minibuses, large coaches, and more moving all the people to town. They separated us from our bike bags as the bike bags were put on a produce truck (not kidding) and, because of language difficulties, we were unsure whether the bikes would arrive at the hotel (after traveling 6000 miles).

We took the transport to our hotel, El Reloj ("The Clock") arriving midday Thursday. Early Sunday the race would start.



View from El Reloj

The views from the hotel were fantastic. The staff, although they didn't speak English, were accommodating. Our next-door neighbors in the hotel ended up as the two top male and female competitors. These professional triathletes are very nice people. I got selfies with retired female pro, Lucy Gossage and the number two male finisher, Alan Hovda. Lucy is having a fun retirement traveling to "destination races," and Alan is a stay-at-home dad while his wife, a corporate attorney, supports the family and the "prime sponsor" for his professional triathlon career. They have a cute three-year-old boy who, when he was to run

with his father across the race finish line, asked his mother to make sure he had his "fast shoes" on so he could be fast with his father. Super cute.

I can't imagine how many races that kid will win.

We went to explore Coyhaique for several hours. The town of Coyhaique is cute. Even though it is the biggest city in the region, is still a tiny town. It has a large open square with vendors selling many handmade woven goods and metal jewelry. We bought clothing and jewelry from the vendors. We took a picture with each artisan who made the items we bought.

We returned to delivered bike bags! After a nice lunch, I assembled my bike. However, in my anal-retentive desire to protect my derailleur from damage, I had twisted up the chain to where I couldn't fix it myself (how do you put two loops in your bike chain?). There was a bike shop a four-block walk from the hotel. Another competitor with bike repair needs, and I went there to have respective bikes fixed. The bike shop worked for "tips". After spending about \$20 for 40 minutes of bike service, we had working bikes.



The next day was the bike drop off at the race hotel (The Dreams Hotel and Casino), the "nicest place in town." The bike drop-off was in front of two large military trailers. These trailers would transport the bikes to the swim/bike transition location the night before the race. As I checked in, race officials double checked our bikes, their brakes, and that most of the accessories weren't loose. The rumors said the bike course pavement would be rough. Race officials also took a picture of the bike and the person dropping off the bike for a security record. Then at the end of check-in, a military truck came and towed the bikes away.

I had talked other competitors that had different tires on their bikes than I did along with extra inner tubes and, sometimes, extra tires. Only having brought one set of tires, my delicate race tires, I was a little nervous and, after the race briefing, became more so.

Back at El Reloj, we received "Welcome Kits" from the race organizers. Each Welcome Kit contained two CO₂ cartridges (which is everybody's main concern since you can't take compressed gas cylinders on an airplane).

The Race Briefing.

Although the race advertised a limit of 300 athletes, a little more than half of that number made it to the starting line of the race. Each athlete was to bring at least one support person as the race was mostly unsupported. This means your support person is to bring all the food, water, and other race food/nutrition and clothing the athlete would need for the entire day.

There were several points on the racecourse, where the race organizers would provide water, but those were few and miles and miles between.

I understood that we would need to catch the bus from the main town square to the race start at 2 AM. However, with most things communicated during the race, this was not the case. The last bus would leave at 2 AM, but we could board at 1AM making for, what is the earliest race start of my entire life. In fact, I hear people summiting Mt. Everest don't get up earlier than this.

The race offered two transportation options for moving the support through the aid stations. You could have your own car and the support person drives from place to place or you could use a series of minibuses provided by the race organizers. Once the support finished helping the athlete and stored away all the gear, the support would get on the minibus, wait for it to fill with supports and the minibus would drive to the next aid station location. Then the supports would get out of the minibuses, wait for their athletes and repeat.

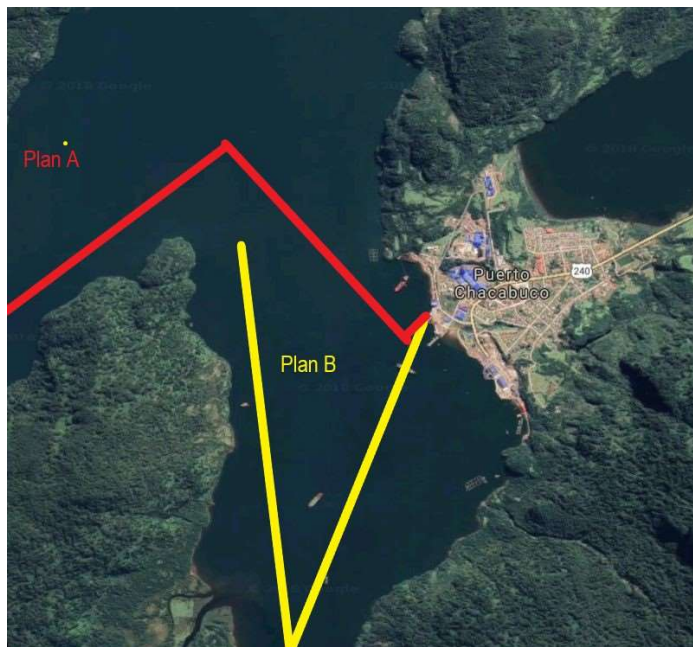
Some professional triathletes told me that the race organizers gave their individual driving supports GPS coordinates of each aid station. Since they often arrived first, and the stations were often in non-obvious places, there was guessing involved. I didn't hear of anyone missing their aid stations.

Despite all of my comments about the little hitches in the race, I think for an inaugural race; the organizers did an outstanding job. This race is an example of the principle that things work themselves out. I give the race organizers a lot of credit for what they did. I think next year's race will be even better. I won't be there. Once is enough.

During the presentation, Ignacio (the guy in charge) said there was limited space on the minibuses. He requested that the racers only bring medium-size backpacks on the busses, not a large size backpacks. I had a large size backpack and there was no way to downsize it with six hours' notice. So, we ignored that instruction and hoped for the best. The next thing he said is that they had no changing tents so expect nudity. Fantastic! Extreme triathlons involve streaking. Good to know before the race starts.



12 liters of water for athlete and support



Swim course - Plan A and Plan B

There were several swim course contingency plans. Each involved getting on the large ferry before 4 AM. After that, the starting point depended upon the weather and sea conditions. However, no matter where the Ferry dumped us out, our first swim buoy would be a 4000-ton Chilean Navy frigate.

In swim plan A, the frigate would be on the swimmer's right shoulder (as we swam around a bend in the fjord). In swim Plan B, all the swimming would be within the harbor bay.

The race directors said to just look for the bright lights of the frigate and swim towards that. Then try to swim towards the harbor since it is the only settlement on the shore and will have bright lights to navigate by. This being Patagonia, the weather quickly changes and the winds can become fierce.

If we were to get fierce winds or heavy currents, we would swim Plan B.

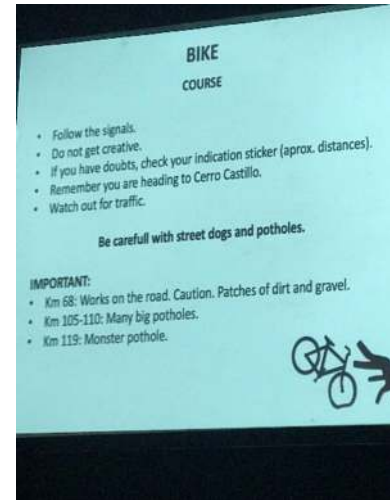
During the race briefing, they had Power Point presentation slides. Each slide describing what to do in the race began with the admonitions, “Do not get creative,” “Follow the signs” “Follow the street signs” to the village we would end up at, Villa Cerro Castillo. I like that the race route is unmarked and you need to get to your ultimate destination navigating like you do in a car without a GPS application. Just follow the signs. Very old-school.

The race organizers then introduced the person in charge of the extreme triathlon race organization, Xtri World Tour (12 crazy races around the world). He started his speech by saying that the theme for extreme triathlons are “shit happens. Deal with it.” That’s all you need to know from his presentation.

Other detailed race instructions included details such as don’t get hit by cars. There was a 200m section of the road where there is no pavement. You could either get off your bike and walk it through the section, or just ride through it (Bet you can’t guess what my choice was). The race director said sometimes storms, rock slides, and other things knock out the roads and they have no way to prevent that. This is Patagonia.

The other hazard was to watch out for was “Street dogs”. Unlike in the United States, there are “wild” dogs that run free in many of the towns and cities. These very domesticated dogs are savvy and friendly to people in parks and outdoor restaurants. They live off of food scraps and other tidbits from people. Some of them that inhabit areas near the course like to chase cyclists.

Three were warnings about potholes along the way including a “monster” pothole at kilometer 119. During a race, I can barely figure out what sport I am doing. Remembering pothole distances, was beyond my capabilities. The race director gave us a sticker with the mile markers and hazards, but the sticker was too big to put anywhere on my bike so I could refer to it in time to avoid impending doom. So, I hoped for the best. When I saw the potholes, I discovered something that Midwestern United States roads have over Patagonia. Our potholes are much better than theirs.



*Navigation flags
(yes, you had to cross that)*

For the run, again, the race director admonished us to not get creative. They also said there were trail sections during the run and they would post large navigation flags (containing the name of a race sponsor, Merrell) every 500m. He said if you don’t see a Merrell flag after you have been running for a while, then you are off course. Comforting. He said they were cattle gates we need to run over throughout the trail and to remember to follow any street signs you might see leading to our ultimate destination, Puerto Ibanez. Old school. Follow the signs (and when did I see road signs? When?!? Mile 22). Our support could meet the athlete at kilometer 30 and run to the finish. Volunteers would staff the aid stations at kilometers 10 and 20 giving us water and Powerade bottles.

Following the race briefing, we tried to go to bed early. At this time of the year in Patagonia sunset is at 10 PM. None of the hotels we stayed in during our two weeks in Patagonia had discovered room darkening blinds, including our current hotel. We set our alarm for 12:45 AM. Two hours later, the loud disco music started from across the street. This awful repetitive noise would upset Barbara and I in normal circumstances. I guess we are at the point of being “old people” who dislike loud noises and the thump thump of Latin night music, but, it was a good backup alarm, and we were not in danger of oversleeping.



*With the race directors at 1am
extreme triathlon.*

When you get up before 1am, you don't have breakfast. Well, you could, but the race doesn't start for another 4½ hours. So we needed to bring breakfast food with us—but no microwave, nothing home made. To get something that would sustain me for the beginning of my race day, we went to a grocery store the day before and bought buns and peanut butter. Since I didn't finish the race anywhere near the front of the pack, I don't think we can categorize this as the breakfast of champions.

The race instructions that coach Liz gives me say I should eat breakfast two hours before start of the race. With this in mind, I asked myself while walking to the bus, when in the hell do you ever get up over two hours before race? The answer? For an

While I wanted to sleep on the bus, there was no opportunity to scope out the course before I arrived in Coyhaique. That knowledge makes for a much better race experience. So I watched out of the front of the bus window because we were driving the first half of the bike course on the way to the start. The surreal thing I thought is that the entire ride was **downhill**. What this meant is that my entire bike would be **up** the same hill. It was a 90-minute bus ride. Oh, and on the windshield, rain. This will be so fun. Welcome to Patagonia.

Just before 3 AM, we arrived at the start, a harbor called Puerto Chacabuco. Our caravan of busses carrying excited athletes and not-so-awake supports arrived at a razor wire fence surrounding a large expanse of concrete. Once the gates opened to let the busses in, we saw a black expanse of water. From the water came a sharp whipping wind and a fierce barrage of light raindrops. Like a beacon of light, a large ferry sat at the edge of the concrete.

The race organizers transported the bikes by truck to the start the night before the race. When we got to the start only one-third of the bikes were on their bike racks. One volunteer setting up bikes told us that the bikes “needed to sleep inside the trucks” overnight because of the high winds (IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT!—JUST SAYING).



We set up our transition areas and put on our swim gear. Transition closed at 3:55 AM. And just to set our expectations for the rest of the day, there were only two porta potties available for all the athletes, supports, and race staff. God help you if you did not bring your own toilet paper as each porta potty came equipped with only one roll.

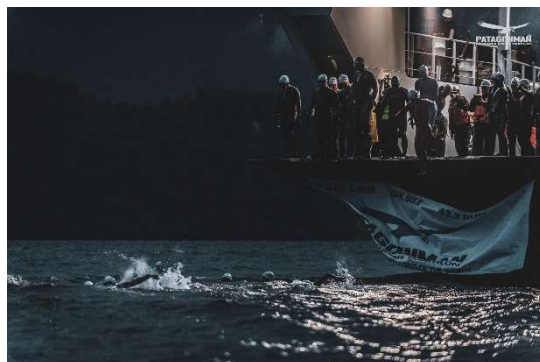
Loud announcements in Spanish distorted beyond recognition by the loudspeaker on the ferry. Since a good portion of the field did not speak that language, the officials herded the wet suit clad athletes towards large car ferry. We formed three long lines to board the ferry as the race officials checked that each athlete had their neoprene caps, booties, (gloves) and timing chip on our ankles. Then they let us on the ferry. It was cold and windy. Many wetsuit-clad bodies shivered and teeth chattered shuffling onto the boat (and we wouldn't jump in the water for another 90 minutes).

When we asked the race officials with the water temperature was, the only response we heard was, “cold”. The boat took off at 4:10 AM into the pitch darkness. We also heard through the rumor mill that the swim would follow “Plan B”. The wind and waves were too high further out in the fjord to swim. So the entire swim would be within sight of the harbor.

The ferry took about one hour and 20 minutes to get to the race start. It was cold on the ferry deck. Several of us were uncontrollably shivering. Eventually some athletes ran back and forth and did calisthenics to keep warm. I found a warm spot next to a door in which hot air poured out. I stayed there with four other athletes as we took turns warming ourselves and not speaking since it was too cold to inquire what language somebody else spoke. For the race, your support should speak English, Spanish or Portuguese – all other languages were off the table. The boat went on for what seemed like forever until the Ferry's PA system barked loud and unintelligible noises that hurt your ears. You could not tell what language it was. The message turned out to be that a member of the ferry crew could spray an athlete with seawater to fill his or her wetsuit so that the body could pre-warm the COLD sea water. That way it wouldn't be as bad when you jumped into the abyss off the ferry. I thought this was crazy, but many athletes let one of the crew to spray tons of water through a large fire hose onto themselves. Gee, that's just dumb. The guy with the hose was laughing. I stayed in my warm doorway until the ferry door slowly opened. And behind the door, it was just black.

We eventually learned that we were on a reverse check mark course. We would swim from the ferry around the Chilean Navy frigate anchored very far away (frigate on your left as you pass!). Through the blackness, you could just see the running lights far away, two sets of running lights. There was a long discussion amongst the freezing athletes on the Ferry which set of lights we would swim to. Luckily, one set of lights turned itself off so there was only one choice. As the sun rose, it lit up the snow-covered peaks surrounding the fjord. The ferry door lowered showing all black. The organizers strafed the Patagonman banner over the door opening and the shivering athletes shuffled to the edge and jumped in groups of three and four 10 feet into the cold water to swim against the tide towards the light

There is nothing better than jumping off a perfectly good ferry into the sea in the night's middle in Patagonia. Really. The water was warmer than I thought, a balmy 55°F and I was regretting the swim gloves I had on. The water warmed up in my suit quickly and I could hear the ship's PA system articulate for the first time. They said, "don't start, wait for the horn." As most of the swimmers crept closer to and past the arbitrary starting line (I think they call this starting line creep), the look back at the ferry was eerie. A blue-and-white ferry in the morning twilight with figures in black jumping off with white caps and matching splashes. I moved myself to the front of the field hoping to stay with the faster athletes. (And you might have thought that self-delusion gets to you only near the end of the race.)



During the lead up to the race once arriving in Patagonia, it was quite intimidating. First, my neighbors at the hotel were the leaders of the race. I swear that their body weight and body fat percentage were at least half of mine. Others around us compared their various extreme triathlon races and Ironman races with each other. I had no Ironman races and no extreme anything. All their race times for these extreme races were better than what I think I could do if this is just a flat Ironman race. The caliber of athletes that attended this race was high. It was all above my athlete pay grade. No wonder why coach Liz told me I was driving her to drink (Malbec on the way to you!). My main

consideration now was to just make the bike cut off. I needed to get there in the next 11 hours. I did not spend all the money and time training not to make the damn bike cut off.

Eventually the Ferry horn blew, I pressed start on my Garmin triathlon watch (but, of course, before the GPS tracked so I got no GPS tracking data on the swim), and we were off toward a small red light below a dark snowy peak.

While I thought just about all the 160 athletes at the start would be faster in the bike and the run than I was, I thought my swimming skills would sustain me in the top one quarter of the field. That was my first piece of humble pie. The lead pack quickly left me in their wake. Then the second pack left me in their wake. Then my swimming gloves started to slip off. Hate. Swim. Gloves. And, no, they do not act as good paddles as they slip off your hands. They become more annoying as time goes on while you take occasional breaks to adjust them back onto your hands, accidentally swallow water, cough up a lung, repeat. However, I knew from my pool swim testing that my pace with these gloves and without the gloves was comparable. So, I sucked it up as another swim pack left me in their wake. Well, I thought, fewer people to yell “nice swim” at me as they pass me on the bike.

After that, I swallowed my pride, banished my hubris and repeated the mantras: “swim your own race”, “don’t blow up during your swim”, and my favorite, “it’s going to be a long day. Chill the F*ck out.”

Eventually, I found a rhythm and enjoyed the view. When will I ever be swimming in a fjord with snow-capped mountains on each side of me in a rolling fog and whipping wind? I made a straight line towards the light in the distance.

As the sun rose, the guiding boat light disappeared, and the Navy frigate “buoy” grew in size. Frigate on your left, Ben. Go around the front anchor chain. Don’t get sucked into the prop wash or let the current suck you underneath the boat. But, of course, as I went by, I had to hit the large metal monster with my open hand. After all, I don’t think anyone would shoot or arrest me if I did that here. Whack! Ouch! That was just dumb. Swim your own race, remember? You need to have fun while racing, right?

The current changed once the swimmers went around the front of the boat, whisking us quickly towards the harbor. Most of the swimmers knew the general direction to go, but we were not sure. We were glancing at each other and popping our head up to look at the shore. About ¼ mile from shore, we saw the big orange “swim finished” blow up thingy on a concrete landing.



My goal was for the swim to be between 1:15 and 1:25 hours. But this was my first Ironman distance swim, and I had no idea what to expect. I exited the water at 1:15. Middle of the race field. While I didn’t know it then, I was only 30 minutes behind the race leaders. (Living part of your life in denial of your true lack of speed is the way to go!). In addition, this is my first swim with booties, and I didn’t know how much they would slow you down in the water. The bonus of having booties was the run to transition after the swim. We had to run over a rocky parking lot. Normally you run gingerly, so you don’t hurt your feet. This wasn’t necessary in my neoprene clad feet and my speed to the transition area was fast, then things got slow.

Despite all my planning and carefully laying out my gear in front of my bike for maximum transition efficiency, my transition was slow. With my support’s help, we stripped my swimming gear, booties, wetsuit, goggles, swim cap with

PATAGONMAN logo, swim gloves, bathing suit, into a large wet pile.

(As I mentioned before, my lovely spouse—who I absolutely worship—was acting as my support for the first and last time in her life - by her choice and not by her performance. I can’t understand why someone wouldn’t want to wait around for hours and hours for her plump middle-aged lycra clad husband to swim/roll/waddle slowly into each transition—what’s more exciting than that!?!)



Then the bike clothing choice began. First, there were no changing in tents. So, I embraced the expected nakedness, avoided looking around, and changed to bike shorts from my bathing suit. Then I got the top of my racing suit on and made a closing decision. The race organizers warned us that in Patagonia, expect “four seasons in a day” plus some rain. I did homework in advance and knew there might be a misting rain and temperatures of between 55°F and 60°F for the first section of the race. In addition, I supposed the initial part of the course to be flat with some gentle climbing. I made a bet that the heat that my body would produce during the bike ride would exceed my need cold weather gear and I went just with my triathlon suit. Most of the other athletes had on winter biking gear as they started out. After posing for several pictures (run your own race, Ben) that my wife wanted to take and adding a liberal handful of Chamois cream below, I was ready to start the bike ride.

In Patagonia, I think the definitions of “flat” and “gentle incline” are bit different from what I am used to. This is true in other situations addition to racing. For example, three days later we did a medium difficulty six-hour glacier walk that was anything but medium difficulty or a walk. The only thing we found out that was the same was the six-hour part. At least the first three miles of the bike course were flat. Then came the first waterfall. Then the rolling hills with the blue lupines along both sides of the roadway. The lupines then turned purple and white. As I began my 965 foot climb to the first aid station, the scenery became magnificent. The course and road went along a river bed. In the dry river bed, cattle and sheep grazed on small islands bathed in fields of almost neon green grass. That was just the beginning of the nature show.



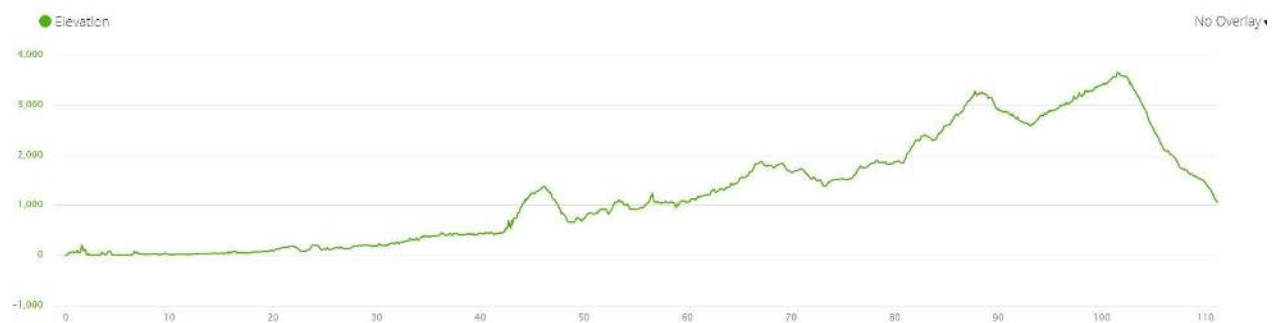
"Medium" difficulty hike



Then again, I might not have paid enough attention to the course details since they were in meters. The Athlete’s guide estimated the climb at 2500 meters, or 8200 feet (it was a bit more than that). The biggest climb I did on any bicycle was a 3500 feet climb in St. George Utah during a ½ Ironman race two years ago. But the climbing here was seemingly never ending. For those of you who live in mountainous areas, that may not be a big deal only, but for this flat land boy, it was something new. There was one damn hill followed by another damn hill followed by terrifying downhill only to go up yet again.

During this race I would do 8658 feet of climbing up and 7592 feet of descent. The worse the hills became, the better the scenery. Woo hoo!

The multiple waterfalls, mossy river formations, and winding mountain roads were fantastic ways to distract my mind from all the climbing. The challenge for this race, other than the quickly dawning realization that I bit off



Bike Profile – It didn't look that bad on paper

much more race than I could chew, was pacing. Coach Liz gave me no power or effort targets since we did not know most of the race course. We had a profile for the ups and downs of the race but the extent of what those meant never hit home with me until I was on the course. We had no wind information, pavement information, etc. The worst thing was for me to learn that Liz wanted me to “just go by feel” the entire race. She told me to put forth effort to make the whole day “sustainable.” Ugh. That’s the exact opposite of what I wanted to hear. I love the numbers on my workout electronics, watching wattage, speed, heart rate, and more. I could focus on a specific number on how hard I am pushing on the bicycle open and just dial into that and not listen to my body at all. Of course, none of that ended up applying to this race and now I had to do the exact opposite on the longest and hardest race of my life. The only relevant thing was to watch my heart rate. Which, going by feel, I just didn’t do since I really had no idea what heart rate to have anyway given all the climbing. So, I just trusted myself and pedaled. “I couldn’t have designed this better for you, Ben!” Liz, emailed. I could just imagine the wry smile on her face as she typed that.

After the scenery, the best part of the first leg of the race were the minibuses that transported the supports. Once your support person cleaned up all the items from transition and put the wet pile in a bag, they jumped in the minibuses which would drop them off at the next aid station. At that point, they would give their athletes food and water plus clothing changes needed for the next segment of the race. In the middle of this leg, a red minibus passed me with my wife hanging out of the passenger window, iPhone in video mode, recording away and cheering. In what other race outside of Kona can you have a live video of your stellar bike performance (or in my case, another one quarter of the field passing me)?



Barbara's handiwork while hanging out of the minibus window.

I rolled into the first aid station feeling mostly fresh with time of 1:25 hours (my estimate was that this would take me between 1:15 hours and 1:30 hours to complete, so far, so good). We switched out some Gatorade bottles and hydration backpack with nutrition. I wouldn’t see Barbara again for another 56 hilly miles which turned out to be over 6250’ of self-supported climbing.



Leaving first bike aid station

The race staff manned the next aid station volunteers (the race did not permit supports at this aid station). It was at the halfway mark of the course, just past the town of Coyhaique, another 29 miles ahead and 2600’ of climbing to go. My memory of that section of road, other than the 200 meters that had no pavement, was to be astonished at the scenery. The climbing was relentless, and the course punished me for having a low Watt per Kilogram (W/kg) power output. Athletes and coaches measure power on the bike based on the amount of wattage you can produce in relation to how much you weight. Good triathletes can put out over 3.5 W/kg. During this section of the course, I managed just 2.0 W/kg. Maybe I should stop eating pizza? During the segment, I kept on telling myself to do what coach Liz and her husband Chris told me which was: be sustainable, run your own race, and keep moving forward. Don’t stop.

When I ride at home on the roads, I need to watch carefully for cars. Sometimes I think, when they honk their horns at you, they hope that in your surprise you swerve further back into the roadway so they can mow you down with an evil grin and Muahahahaha laugh. Here it was quite the opposite. Many cars would beep and honk their horns with the locals leaning out the windows yelling and cheering joyfully at us with encouragement. Near each small town, the locals came out to cheer. Never (well, except for Ironman races in Madison, WI) do I think I will experience such a supportive crowd. I think they were so excited because I don’t think this region of the world had ever seen a major triathlon before. Plus, they thought we were all crazy. Army motorcycles even escorted us.

After some slow going, I arrived at the mid-course aid station two hours later.

During last four years of my coached triathlon experience, I have been weary of the race course-provided nutrition, especially abroad. I have heard of US brands having different formulations than I am used to. Here, that was the case and, lucky for me, I brought my own hydration solution (Gatorade endurance powder mixed with water. The race provided aid stations carried both water and power aid. The water was welcome, Powerade came with 40 calories per 12 ounces serving. That small number of calories would kill my nutrition plan, possibly ending my race early for lack of calories.

After refueling, I had half the course and 5000' of climbing to go. The route went past some local cliffs I later found out were good for sport climbing and the real rolling hills began. They are a kind of



Warning! Hill ahead!

like the rolling hills the Wisconsin Ironman courses, but less steep and much, much longer. I swear the whole next leg was a nonstop climb. It went through some small passes. One of the subtle indications you would be in trouble with the next set of hills were the road signs. However, the real torture began after you entered the Cerro Castillo National Reserve Park.

This park has one of the most beautiful mountain chains in the region, topped by glaciers. The runoff from those glaciers creates rivers and waterfalls. This is the part of the course that my wife was afraid of for me since Patagonian deer, guanaco (a non-domesticated cousin to the llama), and the top predator, the mountain lion inhabit the park. During my preparation for the race, there was a video posted on the Patagonian Facebook page showing video footage from the road of a mountain lion stalking, then chasing, then pouncing and killing a guanaco. Barbara was

terrified this would happen and strongly encouraged me to bring "mountain lion spray" for defense or at least a small laser pen (because all cats like to chase the quick laser dot, right? Always be prepared!). I told her that my main defense would be to bike with somebody slower than me and use my incredible burst speed to make sure the mountain lion would get the other biker and not me. Not only did I not have mountain lion spray, nor a laser pen, but most of the racers had already passed me. The only thing attacking me was gravity.

The harder course got, the better the scenery became. And the scenery was stunning. I had company during the bike as those of us in the back of the pack suffered together at an average speed of 12.1 mph while climbing 3600' and descending less than half of that. I could make up some slow time by getting my bike up to 49 mph on down hills; but that speed didn't matter since I was so far behind the pack. As I pulled into the aid station at mile 84, I knew I would make the cut off and get to use the first and only porta potty so far on the bike course.



I estimated time of 3:40 hours to 5:00 hours to go from mile 27 to mile 84 and I did that in 4:16 hours. I was so happy at this point (well, after I peed -my bladder was about to explode). Then I had to find my wife for refueling



No pavement!



40km to go with 30kt head winds ahead

and more chamois cream. The challenge with being a support in this race is that it is a long time between athlete sightings with no progress reports. My wife took a nap in the back of one of the minibuses while not feeling well. After three or four minutes of searching and pantomiming pidgin Spanish to others, somebody found her and woke her up so she could restock my supplies. As I headed out for the last quarter of the course, a volunteer happily told me I had only 25 km more to climb and the final 15 km would be all downhill!

It was during this next 1400 feet of climbing, I would surpass the longest time my butt has been on a bike seat. My nutrition for the bike comprised various flavors of peanut butter crackers, Gatorade Endurance and cliff bars. Heather, my nutritionist, suggested that I change up the flavors of crackers to avoid “food fatigue”. That is where you don’t want to eat because you don’t like the flavor.

No matter how much change of food I made, after hour 6.5, it all taste like cardboard and sticky icky in a bottle. I needed water to get cardboard down my throat and kept on saying to myself “Mmmmm, this tastes sooo good.” Even I could not convincingly lie to myself. It was nasty. I shoved it in my mouth, used water to get it down because that would keep me moving forward at all times.

Two of the worries about preparing for the bike course, were the high winds and the quality of the road pavement. Despite warnings about the roads, they were in much better shape than those in northern Illinois in the fall. The wind reports that my friend Jack Davidson helped me to look at before the race, were accurate. They predicted a crosswind or tailwind until you got deep into the Cerro Castillo Park mountains. This was a superb thing. Until it was not. These winds had their revenge during the final 9 miles and 1000’ of climb. The headwinds spiked to 30 knots. They hit. Hard. Cry. Keep moving forward. Don’t stop. Thank goodness, I had bike glasses. It’s slow. But beautiful (like I care at this point). I wanted it to be over. What a stupid idea this race was. What was I thinking? Why does this uphill look like a downhill (it looks that way, but the river was flowing toward you? I don’t think water flows uphill). And then the downhill started: 2500’ of downhill over 9.5 miles. A very curvy 9.5 miles. Blind curves. Unknown pavement. In that wind. The bike hit 36 miles-per-hour as I was riding the brakes. The view going down the Andes Mountains range was breathtaking. And so was trying to control the bike hoping I wouldn’t miss a turn and fly off a cliff. I was hoping my brakes wouldn’t detach from the fork of the bike frame. I wondered, desperately, whether the brake pads could melt and catch fire. So terrifying. So fun. I might need therapy to get over my terror.



Curves of Death

The bike course ended in the small town of Cerro Castillo, on a back road, without a porta potty, and by a time of 7:20 hours (the race clock said 7:40, but who is tracking at this point any way? I made the cut off!).



Who is excited to run a marathon?

Now, how the hell am I going to run a marathon?

I ripped up my clothes, naked to the world again, but this time I applied sunscreen. I would pay for this oversight during the next couple of days with the killer farmer's sunburn. I even put "apply sunscreen repeatedly" on my race checklist and ignored it.

I decided to do the marathon by always be moving forward and taking my iPhone for pictures. After all, if you aren't running much, you might as well record the view. This run would be 3000' of constant nasty climbing and I don't climb well. When I did the half-marathon run in St. George, Utah, the climb was half of what I would do here. I ended up walking that race. Unfortunately, I would repeat that, oh, those hills.

At this point in the race, I decided that I just wanted to finish, uninjured. I scheduled a six-hour glacier hike in three days and I didn't think you could do that well in a wheelchair. For the first 2 miles the run, there was a paved road for a little and then we turned off to run down a dirt road. The stint on the dirt road ended after another couple of minutes. The course diverted through a gate outside a pasture to a dirt trail. After another mile of farm running the climbing began, a 1.4 mile segment climbing 700' at a 9.5% grade. You can't run up stuff like that. Well, at least I can't. Did I mention nothing in Patagonia is flat, and my Midwestern dictionary doesn't have their definition of "rolling hills". Besides the terrain, we need to avoid the farm animals roaming in the field. Some of them were large and moved fast. At least, we didn't see mountain lions. Since climbing that grade isn't hard enough, the hill was all loose dirt and gravel. The race directors told us to follow white ribbons tied to bushes and to find the

large "Merrill" flags (race sponsor) that they said they placed every 500m so we didn't get lost. If you didn't see a flag in a while, they said, you were lost and should backtrack.



Yeah, YOU go run up that.

We were to head down a bumpy, ever climbing dirt road towards Puerto General Ibanez on the shores of the great Lake General Carrera (also known as Lake Chelenko). Luckily, there was only one long and unpaved route to follow. No getting lost now.



Besides the challenging terrain, the weather became sunny and very warm in the late afternoon. Luckily that didn't slow down my run (you have to be running for the weather to slow your running).

Like with the bike, as the hills got worse, the scenery got better. As the temperature rose on the run, the views got better. You could see lakes, mountains, rivers and glaciers. One view was better than the next despite the climb and the heat. But those hills. I really should run on flat surfaces only.

During training, Coach Liz gave me a lot of hiking and fast walking workouts. I thought those were silly workouts and pointless, but I did it anyway because I am paying her for her expertise, and she knows best. As usual, I didn't really believe it, since they were easy workouts. I love easy workouts. And now I was hiking and fast walking a marathon. She was right. I was wrong. I admit it. Always listen

to Liz. (This statement does not necessarily apply to next season!)

I thought I would walk up the hills and run down them. After looking at the back sides of the rolling hills, I decided to walk those too. Reduce the risk of falling, tripping, and injuring myself is a good process goal, right? Pushing it might have moved me up in the standings, but when the super heroes at the front of the race are hours ahead of you that effort might not create any dividends for you, only pain. I think my heart rate was in heart rate Zones 1 and 2 the entire marathon. But I ended the day only losing one toenail. No twisted ankles. No road rash. I ran on the flat stuff. There wasn't much flat stuff. At all. I stayed at a sustainable pace.



As the run progressed, so did obstacles. Including fording a 2-foot-deep 50-foot-wide stream. Worried about my feet, getting blisters, and given my non-blistering pace, off went the shoes and socks before crossing the stream and the ankle-deep mud. Once on the other side it, I couldn't clean the mud off my feet very well. I gave up, put on my socks and shoes, and continued on muddy and mostly dry. At the recommendation of fellow athlete and podiatrist Lisa Rechkemmer, I packed extra socks in my backpack and a blister kit. I thought I was ready for the rest of the course.

There were aid stations every 10 km on the run course. Support would only see me at 30 km. In my mind, I broke up the marathon hike into four 10km sections which helped me mentally tackle the distance and time. It was hot out. The road was dusty. You needed to hold your breath and cover your eyes after vehicles went by every 20 minutes. I refilled my water backpack at each aid station using about 1.5 L of water. At those aid stations I asked the volunteers if the hills would ever end. They always replied with "soon." Liars. It didn't ease until 32km. I had foot issues between the 20 km and 30 km aid stations. When I stopped to attend to my feet, I sat on what looked like some soft moss, that was actually a mean Patagonian prickly moss. After pulling thorns out of my glutes, applying moleskin to the developing blisters and changed my socks (thank you Lisa, you are my hero), I ventured forward, never stopping.



Panorama!

At the 30 km mark, I saw my lovely support (and a porta potty!). The race rules permitted your support to run with you from kilometers 32 km to the end. To keep my marriage together, Barbara did not run with me the last 12 km, she took off in a car with another support person to go party by the finish line. After refueling with her I thought, "I got this last 12 km. I will not knock it out in a little more than an hour." Ha! Self-delusion reigns.

The terrain after leaving the aid station turned out to be an endless rolling rocky road along a river. Besides watching out for ankle twisting rocks, you needed to watch for falling rocks from above. At the end of the rolling road was the unpaved road to the end of the race at Puerto General Ibanez. It was a 1200', 3% grade descent over the next 4 miles. At the end, the last 5 miles were flat and passed by a huge waterfall bridge on the way to town. My problem with the downhill run was that I kept on hitting my big toes at the end of my shoes and every step. That was painful. To save my feet, I walked yet again. Bitching about the stupid run stupid race and why did I sign up for this but



Waterfall on the run

always. Left. Right. Left. Right. That really wasn't a low point, just a lot of bitching with no one to listen to or empathize. The world is probably better for that.

After the amazing waterfall bridge, it was flat to the finish. Now I knew I could run. Well, that's what I thought. After 15.5 hours, my body, despite a low heart rate, just didn't want to run. So I ran in intervals of running for five minutes and then walking for one minute. That quickly degenerated into intervals of running for three minutes and walking for one minute. Which became walking for one minute and running for one minute. And the just walking fast. However, I knew I would finish the race.

Eventually the gravel ended (and there were no more loose horses on the roadway), we turned right onto, get this, a paved

road-finally, a paved road for the last mile. I happen to catch up to another runner (I actually passed someone!!!). Then some locals met us. And they walked and ran with us holding cherry branches full of sweet ripe cherries. As they encouraged us, they ran next to us and fed us cherries which were surprisingly refreshing. The finish had the supports who didn't run with their athletes and more locals, who seemed bored since this was 3 to 5 hours after most of the race excitement. I finished going through the chute holding the hands of another runner who I did not know at all but it seemed like a good idea at the time, and I finished at just over 16 hours. Over the line I ran into the arms of my wife who spent the last 20 hours helping me chase this race in honor of my 50th birthday.

As I finished, the race director, Ignacio, put the finishing metal over my head, I rang the finishing bell, sat down, and had a beer. It was the last beer from the keg in the finishers tent. Of course, by the time I finished, they were out of food. Barbara and I immediately got on the bus for the 90-minute ride back to Coyhaique, eating a dinner of stale trail mix.





On the bus back to Coyhaique.