

talking triathlon with steve jonas

Last summer our editor Jason Mucher did his third multisport race, the Rattlesnake Triathlon, which happened to be the Sprint Nationals for 2007. Quite a few members of the USAT staff did that race, organized into several intra-office teams. Jason reported on his experience in the Fall, 2007 number of this magazine (Vol. 10, Issue 4, p. 8). He experienced a mixed bag of results.

He finished! Great! He finished in one piece. Great! He finished ready to try it again, presumably during this coming season. Great! He reported that he was "thoroughly prepared physically and excited about how everything was going to turn out." The swim "went well" (although he lost his goggles during T-1). He "rode the bike course better than [he] thought [he] would and felt good entering T-2." Then he hit the run, which he described as a "jog a little, walk a lot." He felt bad about that. (How many of us have never experienced that sensation? Hands, please.) Nevertheless he finished under the overall time-goal he had set for himself.

So he felt great, right? Wrong. "I could have beaten my goal by more than five minutes," he wrote. He realized intellectually that he should not have beaten himself up for not achieving a time goal that he had not set for himself. But somehow he still felt bad. He felt that he needed to "redeem himself," but unfortunately last season there was not another race in which he could do that.

With Jason's agreement, for this column I decided to take a look at what lessons we all might learn from his experience. First of all, Jason trained properly for the swim and the bike and even though he had to walk some, he obviously trained right for the run

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too, for he bested his original time goal. Second, while many beginners do not, experienced readers of this column know that the logistics of our sport are complex. Welcome to the club, Jason, of triathletes who make logistics mistakes on a regular basis. It's a large one.

My first multisport race of the 2008 season, the New York Triathlon Club's "March Madness" in New York City's Central Park, will be my 188th. I have lists, I lay out my stuff with care, I try before each race to get focused, on transition as well as the race itself. And I still screw up. Thus I always advise newcomers to the sport to make one of their goals for their first several races getting used to the logistics of both planning for and doing the races. No, it ain't like a shoes-shorts-and-shirt marathon deal.

Third, I always advise beginners to keep their goals simple. For the first few races I recommend not setting any time goals at all. I remember how I felt after I finished my very first triathlon, the 1983 Mighty Hamptons, held in Sag Harbor, N.Y., on September 17. (Yes, as I tell first-timers at my races, "remember today. You will never have the experience of doing your very first triathlon or duathlon again. I surely don't remember every race I've done, but I do remember that first one.") I just wanted to finish, as I like to say, "happily and healthily." Since I've never been fast, but love the sport, that's been my goal in every race I've

done since then. If you are fast or have the potential to become fast, that's great. Obviously you are eventually going to want to set time-goals. But when you are starting out in the sport, give yourself some time to get to that point. Fourth, there's always another race, even if it is next year. In that context, it's helpful to understand that once you get into our sport, training is a year-round endeavor, although it can and should be done as some lesser level over the winter to give both your body and your mind some relative down-time.

But the most important lesson here is about goals and goal-setting. Most of us do this for fun. You have more control of your goals than you do of your performance on a given day. Unless you do have to make a certain time or finish ahead of certain people in order to qualify for a next step, why not set goals that you are pretty sure you will be able to achieve? That makes it so much easier to have fun. This suggestion applies whether you are fast, slow, or in-between. Whether they are designed to stretch you out in terms of performance or designed to get you across the finish line simply feeling good and feeling good about yourself, your goals should be both reasonable and realistic. And if you do achieve them, for heaven's sake don't feel bad because you didn't achieve some other goal you didn't set at the outset. Goals should be there to work for us. We shouldn't be there to work for the goals.



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