

Bay Islands Triathlon, Roatan, Honduras
March 6, 2004

contributed by Jannette Finch

International:

swim 1.5K/bike 40K/run 10K

Sprint:

swim 1.5K/bike 20K/run 5K

There is a short version of this race report and a long one.

The short version:

I did the sprint distance race and I was very thankful for that. It was one tough course, including a long swim for a sprint and “EL Diablo” on the bike, a hill with a 12 degree grade. The run course could have been in any Xterra race—it was partially on trails through the forested hills. Great fun and when you travel 17 hours on 5 different planes, it tends to weed out your competition, so I won 1st masters female in 2:34:09.

The long version:

You’re still reading? Okay then. Fasten your seatbelts; it’s going to be a bumpy night.

Why this race? It sounded like a good way to combine a vacation and a triathlon in a beautiful tropical island and my friend Cal signed me up. Why not? Several times, we almost cancelled our trip, due to work conflicts, airline cancellations and timidity. I’m glad we persevered, even though the airline cancellation meant we had to go on another airline, which made the return trip 17 hours and 5 plane rides. The good news, for me anyway, is that I am no longer afraid of flying in commercial jets. After flying across mountains, ocean and jungle in small twin engine propeller planes, I can handle any big old jet airliner. When I called home to report I was alive, my Dad seemed pleased to learn that there were two engines. “Oh, you can fly a plane with one engine!” he said. My thinking is that they probably DO fly with one engine occasionally. I’m just glad I didn’t have to experience it.

I am not a good flier and I had just learned that overloaded airplanes crash. This knowledge stuck right up front in my brain as I watched bike case after bike case being crammed into the cargo hold. When they run out of room in the back, they load a tiny little space in the nose of the plane. Great. Luckily, there were a lot of tiny skinny elite athletes on our flights. I think the Clydesdales were making their way to the island on fishing charters.



**Taormina's
rear view**

Spending time talking with and watching the elite athletes while we waited and waited in the airports was fun. There were many well known elite athletes competing, including Sheila Taormina, who won in 2003 and finished second this year.

There were a lot of elites in Roatan because this was an ITU race, where they hope to gain ITU points. I got the impression that most athletes want a shot at representing their countries in the 2004 Olympics. Especially the Greek athletes. What an honor. Unfortunately, Panagiota Kastrouni flatted on the course, but was out working hard and training the next day, with her coach following behind in a rented truck. He let her have a smoothie at Rudy's in West End (not to be missed), but joked he was going to make her run to the airport. Those Greek coaches! What cards!

Since there were only 200 entrants in the race, we had lots of opportunities to hang with the pros. I learned a very important tip from them: bring your own food. Until we figured out how to hail a water taxi to get to the next village for groceries, getting food was a little problematical. The pros bring their own. We watched Victoria Seay (Canada) slice cucumber and cheese and put that and ham on whole wheat pita bread while we were waiting for the school bus to take us around the course. Because her food was portable, she was also able to eat when she wanted to, instead of waiting for food on island time. When you are feeding an elite machine, you need the right fuel at the right time. My machine runs ok for a couple of days on bar food and rum, but I'm not as finely tuned as an elite athlete. I am the John Deere of age groupers.

It was surreal to be in a tiki hut on an island in the Caribbean, talking with an athlete representing the Czech Republic about someone we both knew. Radek Parnica happens to live in Savannah and guess who he bikes with occasionally? Charleston's favorite man to beat, Jerry Rothschild! We discussed Jerry's amazing aerodynamic calf "muscles."

Ok, I realize I haven't even described the race yet. Transition was in front of a hotel that caters to Italians, so the number of speedos in the area was overwhelming. Triathletes were identified by their conspicuous lack of body hair.

In transition, setting up was the same as any race, anywhere, with people stretching and talking, borrowing the bike pump and checking equipment for the millionth time. The

body markers switched from Spanish to English as needed. Not too different from James Island County Park except that more people had their names printed on their butts.

The Swim (1500 yds - 1.5 K)

When we walked down to the race start, a guy from Set-Up, Inc explained the swim course. The course was a large triangle marked by two orange buoys at the turns. A third buoy was supposed to be in the center of the long stretch parallel to the shore but it deflated at the start of the race. Set-Up's additional buoys never made it to the island; they were lost luggage. The course was a giant triangle, right to left. We went in waves; elite males first, then elite females, then both male and female age groupers. I hung well to the back since I am way tired of the washing machine start of a triathlon. It's the most amazing thing to be able to see everything. You can see the people swimming all around you, the reefs as you pass over them, the ripples of the sand, the tropical, vibrantly colored fish. Like being on the set of "Finding Nemo." Too cool and very hard to focus on the quality of your swim when there is so much to look at.

At least that's my excuse. It's so difficult in triathlon to keep mentally positive, so I had some words with myself when I found myself trailing the guy doing SIDE STROKE. Yes, the side stroker was beating me. It turns out he was a pro experiencing shoulder cramps. Then the pink caps of the relayers and Clydes caught me. Sucks. But I tried to remind myself I was there to vacation, not necessarily to compete. It's too early in the season to do my version of racing (not fast enough to really be racing). So I concentrated on having fun and taking it easy.

The waves were those rolling kind that I think is fun—they just kind of rock your body back and forth. Those waves make some people seasick, although in the clear water, I saw no evidence that anyone was sick. I tried not to think too hard about what I might be swimming in. Charleston only stopped dumping septic systems into its harbor 20 years ago, and this island just got electricity 11 years ago!

T1

Before I knew it, I swam left around the second buoy and it was time to make my way to shore and the crowd of people gathered. We trotted through the Henry Morgan resort and the Italian's volleyball court. I stopped to rinse my feet off in a spigot, not knowing that the volunteers had placed water tubs for our convenience. In T1, I took more time to put on my bike gloves. I had decided I needed them the day before, when I rode part of the bike course. Living in the low country doesn't give me much practice on mountain descents, and I was terrified that my hands would slip, leaving me with road rash or worse for no more fun in the sun. I was glad to have the gloves on, not so glad when I tried to mount my bike with my speedplay covers on. Dork!

The Bike (Sprint- 20 K or about 16 miles)

The bike course immediately began with slight ascents out of T1, then the mammoth 12 degree grade of "El Diablo." The race director warned me about this giant hill by email after I registered. Pros even walk this hill in order to save their legs for the run. The good news about El Diablo is that it is the worst ascent you will see. The rest of the course,

especially the half that the International Distance racers had to repeat, is fun rolling hills with plenty of descent to climb the next ascent. I walked up El Diablo with plenty of company, and I walked up the other side, too, although I had ridden up this side the day before in training. No big deal—I am vacationing!



Down here are horses being driven up the road

El Diablo

It was my goal to not crash on the bike and I'm happy to say I achieved it. Others weren't so lucky. At least two elites crashed. One woman went down in the gravel on the turn into T2 and one man crashed on a descent and had to go to the hospital, but he had no major injuries. I don't know their names.



Backside of El Diablo

One of the best things about the bike course was the “Tour de France” feel of it. It seemed as if everyone who lived along the road was participating, watching and shouting, “Vaya!” Sometimes I would reply in one of the few phrases I knew, “Cansado!” and they would laugh. I had a lot of fun high fiving the kids, who responded like I was a star!

It's a big deal to have this race on Roatan, and I think it requires a lot of cooperative effort. For instance, the road we used for the race was closed to traffic for the race and if you have ever driven or ridden in a car in Central America, you know that is a very good thing. But this closed road was not a secondary country road; it is THE ONLY ROAD. So, all the businesses and homes in the West End and beyond were inaccessible for at least 4 hours. Astounding.

T2

Volunteers were on hand to offer me water as I racked my bike and I took the time to drink some and have a little chat with someone's helpful volunteering Dad. He observed that I was hardly even winded. I said I wasn't hurrying and I wasn't winning and he said I wasn't losing, either!

The Run (sprint-5K)

The run was fun and through some beautiful areas. You run past the armed guards (!) out of T2 and turn right, down a slight grade, then up into the woods on a dirt and gravel trail. I love to trail run, but I stupidly turned my ankle on a rock. I wasn't paying attention to my feet, but was looking at a lost Spanish-speaking competitor. "Where es Finish?" An elite female knew enough Spanish to tell him he had to do the run loop twice. That was very nice of her (Victoria again).



The macheted field of the run course.

I tried my best to move to the side when I heard feet behind me. I didn't want to get in anyone's way who was actually racing. The run trail took us through a grass field that had been macheted clear the day before, then onto a concrete road through a subdivision. The view was absolutely breathtaking. The course paralleled an area known as the Iron Coast—it's a dramatic scene of tombstone-like coral reef remnants. They look almost like our cypress knees out of water, but they are razor sharp and as hard as...iron. In the midst of this garden of dead coral are gazebos, floating above the crashing water of the Caribbean. The whole effect is incredibly romantic and Magdalena, an elite representing Slovenia, told us the day before she is returning to get married there. When she finds someone to marry. I was thankful YET AGAIN that I wasn't racing, so I could actually look at the beauty surrounding me.

Are you STILL reading? Unbelievable!

I had to stop twice on the run to walk—even though it was a 5K, it was more hill than I'm used to. A female elite we had gotten to know in the airport said, "Move it, sister!" That was encouraging, so I did move it.

The finish was sort of like Kiawah, out of the woods and onto the beach, where you could start to hear the music and the crowd and feel that finisher's excitement. "Scoozi," then "grazie" I'd say as I ran through throngs of Italian tourists. They seemed surprised, though I wasn't the first one to pass them.



The finish! The tent is for after party lunch.

At the finish, there were girls in scanty green bikinis holding up banners advertising Port Royal beer, a local sponsor and really LOUD music that played the rest of the afternoon. I felt I had just finished a Half IM. It is a beautiful, tough course. If you look at the results, you'll see you don't have typical finishing times for an Oly or a sprint.

At the awards ceremony that night, I learned some bad words in Slovak and the differences in bad word interpretation between Czech and Slovak culture. Hmm. I hung out with the Academia Militar Honduras. They were perfect gentlemen, very polite. I bought an elite a beer. She drank it! Some things have to be seen to be believed.



With Academia Militar Honduras

Things I learned for next time: I need less clothes and more food. I need a chartered plane. I need more Spanish vocabulary.

Thankfully, we had a little bit of time to explore the island and snorkle in the days following the race. Everyone was very nice and I needed just a bit more time to get the full benefit of island relaxation.



More details and complete results can be found at:
<http://www.set-upinc.com/>

