

Chicago Triathlon Race Report – 8/30/15

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I grew up in St. Louis and had lots of family living in Chicago, so I always considered the Windy City my second home. In 2013, my Aunt Carol, who lived in Chicago, was diagnosed with cancer which was a huge blow to our family as she was our rock; but if anyone was going to beat it, she would. In the months during her treatment, we tried to put events on the calendar for her that would keep her going just one more day. I told her that I was going to do the Chicago Triathlon in 2014 and I expected her to be waiting at the finish for me, so she better beat this. Unfortunately for us and for everyone who knew her, she passed away on October 30, 2013. The next year was pretty much a blur as we all grieved in our own ways. One day in early 2015, it dawned on me that I still owed her a great race and even though she wouldn't be at the finish line in person, she would definitely be there in spirit. So, I signed up for my first Olympic distance race. If I'm doing it for Carol, it's go big or go home. That's how she lived her life.

The Race

ChiTri is HUGE. There were 7,000 competitors this year, but you wouldn't have known it since it was so well organized. A friend of mine from St. Louis, Gina, was also doing the race, so it was cool to have a race buddy, even though I missed the support and camaraderie of TLV. We stayed at the Hilton, which was the host hotel and is highly recommended since it is a couple blocks from the swim start. The only issue is that the race area is spread out over Grant Park and points beyond, so you have to be prepped for a ton of walking above and beyond the race itself. This especially goes for spectators as well. It also didn't help that we walked all over the Magnificent Mile sightseeing. Oops.

On Saturday, there was a mandatory course talk at the Hilton, along with the expo and packet pickup. I shipped my bike via TriBike Transport and they had my bike available for pickup in the Hilton as well. Another race-organized bonus. Once we had attended a course talk and got our packets, we were allowed to rack our bikes in the transition area overnight. The transition area is about a 1-mile walk from the hotel...which we did... in the pouring rain, no less. I wanted to get there and get a prime spot, just like Martha taught us!

Knowing that my age group is really competitive, I had signed up for the Athena wave. The Athenas were grouped with the Clydesdales and the men and women's mountain bike group, which I didn't know ahead of time. I probably wouldn't have signed up as Athena had I known that. More on that in a bit.

Race Morning

The morning of the race was cool and foggy with about 90% humidity. Transition opened at 4:00a and even though my wave didn't start until 7:59a, all Olympic athletes had to be out of transition by 5:45a since the elites started at 6:00a. Lots of people were sleeping on the grassy areas around Grant Park. Surprisingly, I didn't feel nervous. I had followed Martha's plans and had confidence that I would get

this done. Gina and I sat on the seawall above Lake Michigan and waited for the elites. The temperature in the lake had dropped nearly 20 degrees the week before the race and the water was about 60 degrees on race morning. We took inventory on how many swimmers had sleeved wetsuits (most), how many wore booties (none), and how many looked like they were freezing (none). This was a good sign.

Swim – 42:10

With so many competitors, we had to be in the swim chute 20 minutes ahead of our swim wave. I was just excited to get going! The swim entry was a set of 4-5 aluminum steps down the seawall into the freezing lake to tread water for up to 4 minutes. Yes, it was freezing. People in my wave started to panic. One person swam for the stairs and got out. I had my sleeveless wetsuit on and the water felt about as cold as one of the first ocean swims of the season. After the horn went off, I immediately got pummeled by a few Clydesdales who swam up over me. Some guys immediately started swimming breaststroke and I was paranoid I was going to get kicked they took up so much room. I swam around a few, but it was really hard to get away from the group and so I ended up dropping back just for self-preservation. We had to swim south parallel to the seawall and then turn left around a buoy and swim back north. Since the swim is my favorite, I knew I would be okay, but the water was choppy and every other breath seemed like a gulp of water. It wasn't until well after the turn that I started to feel like I got into my groove. The lake was about 10 feet deep in the harbor and clear enough to see the bottom. The swim is neat because spectators can follow you along the seawall the entire way. I kept seeing my uncle and my friend Lori cheering, which made it even more special. The swim exit was another set of wide aluminum stairs and there were volunteers pulling us out of the water. You just had to get near the steps and there were 2 or 3 people pulling you up. During the swim, both of my calves felt like they were on the verge of cramping and when I stepped on to the seawall I felt like my legs wouldn't work. I couldn't straighten out my feet. I guess due to the cold? That was unfortunate because it was a quarter-mile walk/run/hobble to the transition area, which is included in your swim time.





T1 – 14:15

Okay, I have NO idea what happened here. I got into transition and everything seemed to be in slow motion. My calves were still not working. A mountain bike that was not there in the morning when I left transition was jammed into my bike and had knocked my chain off. I took extra time to dry my feet and my socks seemed impossible to put on. Transition was on the side of a grassy hill and it was about a quarter-mile walk itself from swim-in to bike-out. I really can't comprehend that 14 minutes passed here.

Bike – 1:46:28

The bike route starts heading north on Lake Shore Drive. The two inner lanes were closed for the race in each direction and the outer 3 lanes were open to normal traffic. It was like riding on the 5 freeway with nothing separating you from death except for some flimsy orange cones. Despite the description of the course being "flat", it starts out with two hills over the first 2 miles. In fact, LSD had several inclines, which I was happy to have because I was able to pass a few people who were trying to crank through without changing gears. The issue with LSD was the potholes!! We don't do pothole training, but maybe we should?? The road condition was pretty bad due to freeze/thaw cycles. There were also expansion joint gaps at every bridge we crossed that ranged from 3 to 6 inches in width. I passed a rider about every mile or so who was on the side changing a flat. Real quickly I decided I would take it easy to avoid getting a flat or worse – crashing headfirst. We were on LSD for 10 miles before transitioning to Intermediate Wacker Drive. Chicago has several layers of roads downtown. We were on the middle layer of Wacker, which is like a tunnel. Here, the road was completely closed to traffic and it was super eerie. I kept taking off my sunglasses to see if I could see better, but they helped block wind. I saw a rider maybe every 5-10 minutes, but otherwise it was just me and the occasional homeless person. This was a true urban tri. The bonus was that the road conditions were superb, so I was able to increase my

mph. From Intermediate Wacker, we went even lower to the bus lane that goes below Grant Park. There were overcrossings that were filled with spectators, but the further south we went, the fewer people were out, until finally, it was just me again. As I descended into Grant Park, I saw some riders who were on their way back up and who were woefully underprepared for the steep ramp back up to the surface. Two people were on the ground unable to clip out and two others were trying to mash the pedals back to the top. The cool thing was that I was ready for that and breezed by a few riders back up to the final bike stretch. Thank you hill repeats.



T2 – 6:58

Obviously I need to work on my transitions. This included the quarter-mile jog back through transition and down the hill to rack my bike. I was super paranoid about getting blisters from wet feet on the run, so I took time to put on a dry pair of socks and some body glide on my feet. My uncle was really getting into the race and yelling at me outside the fence to get going. I also really had to go to the bathroom, so I made a pit stop before heading out.

Run – 1:46:28

So yes, I apparently had the EXACT same time in the run as I did in the bike, down to the hundredth of a second. Try to replicate that! As I was coming out of the porta-potty, I was accosted (for lack of better words) by a fellow Athena who asked if I wanted a run buddy. I wasn't sure if she was sane or crazy, but I thought it would be nice to have company. She turned out to be a godsend! As we made our way down through the Museum Campus along the lake, we challenged each other to run faster and farther on each interval. By this time, the sun was coming out and it was starting to get warm. The only frustrating part was that by now, the sprint athletes were on the same course, but obviously had half the distance to run. If I heard "come on, you only have (insert some short distance here) left to run" one more time, I felt like I might lose it. By the time we reached mile 4, I was really starting to get hot spots

on the balls of my feet from dampness. Changing socks didn't seem to have helped at all. By mile 4.2, the pain was excruciating. By mile 5, I was sure that my skin had worn off and blood was filling my shoes. Literally. Nothing else was problematic except for the balls of my feet. Regardless, I felt such a feeling of pride welling up inside as I neared the finish and I could feel the love coming from fellow TLV teammates all the way back in California. All the training I had put in and the grief I had experienced in the past many months was coming to fruition and that was what I needed to get to the finish line. It was a moment to remember for sure. I remember looking at my Garmin and seeing 4hr 30 minutes and thinking how my goal time was to finish in less than 5 hours... here I was going to beat my goal by more than 20 minutes! Imagine how much more time I could have saved if I had had swift transitions.

Crossing the finish line, I felt great. I really felt like my nutrition was dialed in and that nothing was particularly bothersome except for my blisters. Had I been talented enough to walk on my hands the last half mile, I would have done so. My finish time was 4:36:18.



Once across the finish line, the extravaganza didn't end there. From the finish area, the transition area is more than a mile away. Had to walk there, get all my gear, and walk back to the finish area to drop my bike off at TriBike Transport. Then back to the hotel. Then we went walking the Magnificent Mile again. Figures.

Total race distance: 32.0 miles

Total extraneous walking downtown Saturday + Sunday: 7.7 miles

Nutrition for future reference:

Before race: banana, half of a Nii bar, 16 oz of Generation UCan

After swim: half of a Honey Stinger waffle, 4 oz of Gatorade

On Bike: 8 oz of Nuun, 12 oz of Generation UCan, 1 GU gel, 6 Sport Beans

On Run: 20 oz of plain water, 4 oz of Gatorade from aid station