

Ralph's Half Ironman California 2005 Michael Lovato

I've always claimed that harsh weather conditions are best dealt with by using Jedi Mind Tricks and other methods of Mind over Matter. I've always hoped for the worst conditions, knowing that I'd tough it out better than my competition could. I've always thought that I could handle anything Mother Nature threw my way. After my race on March 19th in Oceanside, I've changed my attitude a bit.

For this year's season opener, I chose a particularly early event: about three weeks earlier than my typical debut. I had nine good weeks of training under my belt, and I felt fit and ready to roll. Having raced over the Ralph's course a total of four times (twice being in the full Ironman), I had a good familiarity with the terrain. I like the course, and I looked forward to testing myself against it, and to comparing my times to past years' splits. I knew that with some solid racing, I'd be competitive with the formidable field, and that I'd gain some nice momentum leading into my next race: Ironman Arizona on April 9th.

Amanda and I managed to survive what was one of the most trying travel experiences in recent memory, and after about fourteen hours' time, we arrived at our home stay in the San Diego area. The weather was spectacular: sixties and sunny! But the forecast looked bleak: cool and rainy!

Race morning arrived, and it arrived bearing clouds and rain and temperatures in the low fifties: what a bad time for the weatherman to be accurate! But hey, I was capable of overcoming any type of obstacle, so bring it on; or so I thought...

We jumped into the sub-sixty-degree waters of Oceanside Harbor a touch before the gun was to sound. Not being afforded ample warm-up time was most likely a blessing on this day. Eager to test myself against the faster swimmers I positioned my neoprene-buoyed body just right for an early jump. The unexpected gunshot caused a raucous fray amongst the thirty-some pros. I was in the mix, and I was right where I wanted to be; that is until I was kicked—in the hand. Normally this wouldn't be a big deal, but on that particular occasion, the blow was hardy enough to knock my newly obtained wedding ring straight off my finger, plunging into the abyss; gone forever. Ouch. That wasn't something I was prepared to deal with. After a sorrow-filled moment of panic and anger, I pressed forward full-force.

Except for the significant loss, my swim was a success: I exited with the leaders of a strong group. I transitioned as smoothly as I could, while donning gloves and a long sleeve shirt. And aboard my bike I jumped. Shrugging off my dual cramping hamstrings, I rode off in chase of the frontrunners.

Unfortunately, the early cramping was a prelude to much greater, more challenging problems. After five or ten miles, I found myself losing ground to the leaders, while simultaneously getting passed by more than a handful of cyclists: I was slowly slowing. I struggled to find the strength to ride faster, and to warm myself up, but to no avail. My cramping legs were then achy and weak; heavy and chilled. Barely making through the challengingly hilly sections of the ride—normally a strong segment for me—I yearned to finish the 56 miles, and to finish them soon.

After what seemed like an eternity, I finally approached transition. I knew I had lost time to the leaders—a lot of time—how much I did not care to know. I quickly

swapped Javelin and Rolfs for Sauconys and socks, determined to finish the day on a high note; surely there was some salvation somewhere!

It always feels good to start a run fast, and that case was no exception: I was off to the races. I knew I had some ground to cover, and not a lot of time to do so. My additional motivation for knocking out a hard-paced run was heat: the harder I went the warmer I would get, right? I needed that.

My first glance at the leaders told me that I was probably facing about a three-mile deficit. And I was at least two miles behind the next group of chasers. From there back, there were plenty of others in pursuit, and by plenty I mean A LOT! I focused hard on the task at hand: a top run split, and perhaps a top-eight finish.

In spite of my better efforts (a 1:14 run split), I came short on both goals: I finished eleventh with the second fastest run. I was exhausted and I was drained; I was cold again and I was spinning. I staggered to the medical tent and plopped down in front of two gigantic heaters. About an hour later, after having absorbed two liters of IV fluid, I began to feel normal again. I asked to leave the tent, so I could find my wife. I was anxious to see how she had raced. They told me that I was not able to leave until my temperature was back up to 97 at the least. Yikes! I guess I needed to work on my Jedi Mind Tricks!

All in all, I was pleased with my efforts on the day. I struggled to overcome a few hurdles I hadn't anticipated, but I had pushed to the very end. I was proud of myself for sticking things out, and I was happy to have the first race under my belt.

On a much brighter note, I felt extremely fortunate to have the help from some outstanding sponsors. Without the superior equipment and support they provided me, I wouldn't have stood a chance against the Weather Gods or the competition. Thanks for your support, for reading this account, and here's to hot temperatures in Arizona!